

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

10¢
DECEMBER



TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES!
FEATURE NOVEL

● **WAR ON THE STEEL TRAIL**

by HARRY F. OLMSTED

TWO NOVELETTES

● **PRODIGAL'S GUNSMOKE LESSON**

by MORGAN LEWIS

● **COWBOY FROM HELL**

by WILLIAM R. COX

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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DECEMBER 10TH

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AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

Published monthly by Popular Publications, 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, 16, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York 17, N. Y. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter Sept. 24, 1941, at the postoffice at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1943, by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 10c. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. \$1.20. Foreign postage 50c additional. Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send to 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them. Printed in U. S. A.

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A true story of the war, as told by SISTER ISABEL NIXON, Head Nurse of St. Thomas Hospital, London, to a war correspondent.

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1 "It happened during a lull, after many hours of continuous bombing. We were operating on casualties brought to the underground emergency theatre. There was a terrific explosion nearby, then such a frightening blackness as could only come in an operating room . . .



2 "That single stray bomb had shattered the two outside electric plants. It would take time to rig up the emergency plant. Meanwhile we had a victim on the operating table, in danger of bleeding to death. I told all the nurses and medical students to get their flashlights . . .



3 "We grouped around the table, giving the surgeon the light he needed to save his patient . . . Because of the highly inflammable ether we couldn't have used a hurricane lamp. This was one of many, many cases where only flashlights with proper batteries could have been used to save life."

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NO HOLIDAY FOR A HANGMAN!

THE devil's own stew pot was getting set to boil over in Peace City—and only one man knew it. Old Sheriff Hoss Landlee was that man and though he was one of the toughest rawhide-and-barbwire gents ever to wear a star, there wasn't much he could do about the human volcano that was seething below the surface.

For tomorrow would be hangman's day! The thought of it soured old Hoss to the bottom of his belly and soul. And it sickened him to see the holiday crowds flocking to town to see the hanging of the Polka Dot Kid. Some people got a lot of enjoyment out of seeing a man drop through the trap of a scaffold. Not Hoss Landlee—especially when the hangrope was going to stretch the neck of the young Polka Dot Kid.

Hoss told the Kid: "I'm hatin' this hangin' business, Kid. Lord knows I am." Hoss thought a moment of his pretty granddaughter, then went on: "Betty would stake her last chip on yuh, and I ain't never caught yuh in a lie—unless yuh did shoot that cow-buyer an' take his money an' hoss."

"Sheriff," the Kid thrust his hand through the bars, just as he had a thousand times, "I may die tomorrow. It's in the cards. Up there on the scaffold I'll tell you as the last word that I know no more about that killing than you know."

But the Polka Dot Kid was just one of the problems facing Hoss Landlee in Tom Roan's next novel—"Gun-Pard For Hangtown." For Hoss had to think about those four horsemen who were riding toward Peace City. The way those four strangers were riding told Hoss a whole lot of things other people might never have suspected. The four rode in a strung-out

line, eighty or ninety yards apart—and *there was something about that way of traveling that stirred a lot of memories in Hoss Landlee's old head.*

Those riders were strung out like Indian scouts in a hostile country, spaced out so that if one man heard lead whistle the others would be far enough from him to sling like hellions into action and back the unlucky one's play.

Hoss figured that he should have a couple of cool beers and think matters over. He was on his second glass when the devil's stew pot started to boil over. Here, in Tom Roan's own words, is what happened. . . .

A freckled-faced youth of fourteen just about tore the batwinged red flaps out of the front door as he came hurling inside, his eyes popping like buttons, all out of breath and skidding to a one-sided halt in the sawdust on the floor.

"Mr. Landlee!" he yelled. "Mr. Landlee, a turrible thing's done happened up yonder at the jail! Miss Betty Landlee come downstairs an' throwed a gun on your deputies! She made 'em go back in the jail an' let the Polka Dot Kid go plumb free! Together they locked up your deputies, an' they're just about to cuss, an' kick the walls down! They say the Polka Dot Kid's done tooken the best saddle hoss in the corral an' is—is fannin' it like sixty up the canyon!"

In the next issue Tom Roan will tell the whole exciting story of "Gun-Pard For Hangtown"—a bang-up, hell-for-leather novel of the old fighting West. And there will be nine other novelettes and short stories by top-string Western writers. January 10 STORY WESTERN—published December 10th!

THE EDITOR.

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WAR ON

Stirring Novel of Pioneer Railroaders

By **HARRY F. OLMSTED**



Greg's fist lashed out in mighty anger.

Tough luck so methodically dogged the Prairie Construction outfit that the brand of traitor fell upon the head of Greg McClennon, son of the big boss. And war blazed along the steel trail when Greg went gallivanting with the daughter of the rival boss—on the night that drygulch bullets brought down his railroader dad!

THE STEEL TRAIL



CHAPTER ONE

Purgatory Trail

A WARM feeling of satisfaction swept away Greg McClennon's weariness when he topped the hogback and looked across four miles of flat at the construction camp. Trouble had dogged the efforts of the Prairie Construction Company to make the necessary headway to complete Section Seventeen within the time limit. A lot of that trouble had

been the failure of their meat supply to arrive per schedule. Hard driven men will not work efficiently without their two pounds of red meat each day.

Failure of the railroad people to deliver the quota of iced beef at rail-end had threatened the whole contract for awhile. Then Red Tom McClennon, the contractor, had given in to Greg's demand to hunt the meat. Since then the workers had fed heavily on venison, fetched down on mule-back from the timbered Purgatory Mountains. Ten freshly killed deer burdened Greg's ten mules—a two day supply for the camp. And Greg had been out only twenty-four hours.

"Hi-yah!" he yelled at the browsing mules, and he was whistling softly as he started them down the trail through the tangled *chamisal*.

"Hands up, my fine-feathered young friend. Elevate, or I'll blow you outa that saddle!"

The loaded mule train halted, the animals snorting, as a man stepped into the trail, a rifle leveled at his middle. The fellow's floppy hat, held by a chin strap, was pulled low over a face darkly olive in cast. In the shadow of the brim, Greg made out a jagged, angry scar cutting upward to the right ear from the left jawbone. He saw too the cruel cast of lip and nostril and in the muddy eyes he read an unbridled viciousness that made the flesh crawl along his spine. He lifted his hands.

The man nodded darkly, said: "All right, Hub. Dehorn him."

Another man came crashing out of the brush, his face taut with displeasure. "What the hell's the idea, Scar? Easiest an' safest way out is to kill this jasper."

Scar laughed. "Don't worry. He ain't gettin' away. Me, I never could see no fun in just shootin' a man down. Now get his guns an' we'll peg him out onto one of these here big red ant hills. This meat he's shaggin' will tally up to some nice spendin', in Mescalero town. Hurry up, you clumsy-footed fool!"

Under the lash of that voice, Hub shouldered through the tangle, broke into

the trail with a lunge that almost took him off his feet. To a desperate man, any small break looms like a godsend, and this one was all Greg could ask. In a flying leap, he quit the saddle, his plummeting weight bearing the stumbling Hub to the ground. As he fell, he drew his Colt's pistol, heard Scar yell: "Hey!" Then he was locked in a struggle for life.

Hub fought fiercely and for a few moments kept Greg's gun hand well occupied. And Greg fought just as savagely. If he had not disposed of Hub by the time Scar covered that short distance, he was doomed.



BUT Hub was strong as an ox and held him off. Now Scar loomed terrifyingly above him and Greg somehow found his knees and rolled, taking Hub over atop him as the rifle roared. Greg felt the man go limp in his arms and knew he was dead. Scar was cursing fiercely, squinting down the rifle barrel for another shot when Greg let him have it from under Hub's limp arm. The man bawled, spun and became a shapeless lump in the trail. Both of them were down and both of them were dead when Greg got up feeling like a man about to rouse from a nightmare.

The mules were scampering down the trail and somewhere out in the brush a pony was whinnying. A man's voice. "Hey, don't let that meat get away. And don't take too many chances. Make every step sure. You got him?"

That flat, taunting voice maddened Greg, drove caution out of him. "Yeah," he answered, and broke swiftly into the clinging chaparral. It held him back, added to his momentary panic. When he caught the faint outlines of man and horse through the whipping fronds of the brush, his rebel yell sailed exultantly: "Pitch up, you coyote. I've got you skied. Move an' I'll riddle you!"

The man hit the saddle and, flattened like an Indian, flashed away. Greg then slashed the brush with a futile and ineffective fire. And cursed himself when he cooled and realized he had not only missed the third renegade but had not even the most sketchy idea of how he

looked. Dejectedly he went back to where his faithful saddle animal waited, fighting back its terror of the blood smell. Mounting, he continued after his pack animals, now a good half mile ahead.

Yes, there had been trouble, he reflected; there was trouble now and there would be more before Prairie Construction overcame the ever-increasing burden of the time clause and had the acceptance of the Colorado Southwestern as to specification and performance. . . .

Greg was fully master of himself when he reached the camp. There were ready hands to help him unload and hang the carcasses in the meat house—chilled with sawdust-packed ice sawed from winter frozen Lake Pato. Then, with his mules corraled, Greg went to his father's tent office.

He found Tom McClennon out so in the living quarters behind, he bathed, shaved and donned fresh clothing, always watching the clock. He mustn't miss the eight o'clock work train that carried the quitters to Mescalero, returning with supplies and equipment on the morrow. The killing left him unaffected. It had been their lives, or his. But what to do? Report it to Mescalero law—prejudiced against the hard drinking laborers? Or let things ride as they were?

Deciding the latter course to be best, Greg's lips grew tight and he cleaned his gun. Out on the track, the engine whistled. Greg clapped on his hat and ran. He was half across the office when a voice hailed him from behind the littered table.

"Greg—heard you was in, boy." Pride and displeasure battled on Tom McClennon's face. "You—you're not headin' for town, son?"

"Sure am, dad. Every chance I get. Every other day, so as to euchre that smart gambler at the Palace Saloon. Gotta rush. See you tomorrow."

The contractor scowled. "Can't blame you fer gallin', son, though I'd admire if it wasn't the daughter of that Carns snake."

"That isn't seemly of you, dad. Like you, Kelly Carns is building a section of the Colorado-Southwestern, meeting the same problems and—"

"How's he meetin' 'em, son? He's braggin' how he'll freeze me out, ruin me.

What chance I've got here, I've made—fair an' square. Startin' by subcontractin' bridges, culverts an' flood repair. If I finish Seventeen within the time clause, the railroad says they'll give me a fair shake on future biddin'. That'll end Carns' sure thing. You think he'll take that lay-in' down? Not him."

"The things that have slowed us, Dad—well, Carns wouldn't do that to a dog. No more than you would."

Red McClennon snorted. "You've gone soft, Greg. Stay here tonight an' I'll prove it. I hired Lat Bergdoll to run down the facts, in Denver. He's back an' we're havin' a meetin' tonight, with foremen an' sub-contractors present. I was hopin'—"

"No thanks, Dad. I don't like that man, wouldn't trust him or his word. Ask Mescalero folks about him; he was their sheriff till they heaved him out."

"The Colorado-Southwestern has confidence in him."

"They don't know him. I tell you he's a sly customer. 'Night, Dad."

As the train started, he sprinted and swung onto the rear of the one passenger coach. Riding the rear platform, he puzzled. It had been little things that had slowed the work. Food failing to arrive. A train derailed. Sawed shovel handles in the warehouse. A theft of scraper clevises, necessitating haywire repairs until parts could arrive from Denver. But now a bigger matter—attempted murder on the Purgatory Mountain Trail.

In his present mood, it seemed to Greg they were up against too much. They couldn't win. Failure to meet the time clause would break Tom McClennon. What then, Greg wondered, of himself—and pretty Kitty Carns?

CHAPTER TWO

Troubled Waters

WHEN the train reached Mescalero, Greg got off and strode past the engine. The fireman, busy with his oil can, sang out: "If she chills you, Kid, ride back with us. We're draggin' out seven cars of steel, right away. Back in the morning for supplies. They're workin' us to death."

Greg waved derisively, continued to the

creek bank where he was to meet Kitty. She stood silhouetted against the afterglow, looking tiny and frightened. She came to his arms and he kissed her, feeling her tremble, noting her lowered glance. "What's wrong, honey? Trouble?"

"Bad trouble, Greg." She clung to him. "Three men raided our Camp Nine last night, shot the clerk and stole five hundred dollars. Jimmy Wilson, the clerk, lived long enough to describe them."

"This work brings in criminals with the rest," Greg said. "But with all this drifting labor, there will be little chance of catching the guilty ones."

"Jimmy said they admitted being McClennon men," Kitty stumbled on, "and promised our time clauses wouldn't be met if they had to kill dad and all his foremen."

Sobs strangled her. Greg's temper flared. "Lies, Kitty. I know dad too well for that. It's not his way. Wilson must have been out of his head."

She recoiled, but Greg pulled her close again. "Listen, Kit, don't be like that. The Carns Company thinks we're killers, robbers. Our men believe your dad had our engine dynamited, killing the fireman and wounding the engineer. It wasn't you and me, honey. It ain't our fight. Let's get away from it. In Denver we can get married and—"

"Married?" She showed sudden interest. "When, Greg? I've looked forward to marriage since I was in pigtails," she confessed. "But there's not any train till—"

"Tomorrow morning at six. I'll catch the train to camp, get my things and meet you just before it pulls out for Denver. Game?"

"Am I?" She was laughing, crying. "Try me." Her face sobered. "It's hard to leave dad so alone, Greg. When he finds I've married a McClennon—"

"Like dad, he'll be fit to tie. We've got to run our own lives, honey. Now don't you start worrying. See you on the train in the morning. G'bye, honey."

He kissed and left her, looking back only once. Pretty tough, he thought, to tear her up by the roots. But at least it would get her away from trouble that would get worse before it got better. And he'd have years to make it up to her.

Tom McClennon's office was full of smoke and argument when Greg busted in. Hard bitten Tom McClennon sat behind the table, a rimfire cigar between his teeth. Along the wall others were seated. Riley Bunch, tireless, efficient grader foreman. Taciturn Ben Hawks, steel boss. And the sub contractors—stubby, combative Bill Hudlow, bridge man; fleshy, genial Harve Pettibone—culvert specialist, and gangling Cheyenne Potter, who furnished horses and mules.

Latimer Bergdoll had the floor and his talk ceased as all eyes went to Greg. Plainly displeased, he assumed an air of resigned patience. Riley Bunch cried: "I told you he'd be here!" And Tom McClennon's face registered satisfaction.

"Glad you decided to attend, son," he said. "Lat Bergdoll was just sayin'—"

"For your benefit," broke in the detective, scornfully, "I'll begin again. Here's what you're up against—"

Bergdoll was a tough customer, little moved by what others thought of him. He called himself a town-tamer and gloried in recounting his gun tally, when Mesclero had never dreamed of a railroad. Fear and a fast draw had built his rep, but his day was long past and he earned a precarious living as best he could. He still retained much of the formidable front of his heyday. His voice was hatefully courteous.

"Knowin' his troubles wasn't accidental, Tom sent me to Denver to learn who might be interested in bustin' him by way of the time clause. Cigar money bought a two-bit clerk at headquarters. From him I learned about one Jonathon Burton, who has interested the railroad in takin' over all construction on a cost plus. But first he's got to prove the contract system is slow an' inefficient, not to mention too costly."

He paused half triumphantly, and Greg turned amazed eyes to his father. "And you paid good money to get that stuff, Dad? Anybody can interest the railroad in anything without it being our business. We've got a contract. We must get Seventeen under the time wire. To hell with Jonathon Burton an' cost plus."

Bergdoll sneered. "Even if Burton's just a dummy for Kelly Carns?"

"More power to Carns if he can change

the railroad's policy." Greg answered him.

"Spoke like one more loyal to a girl than to his own outfit," rapped Bergdoll.

Greg's jaws tightened. "You keep her out of this, Bergdoll."

Tom McClennon came up, his red hair bristling, his face flaming. "Keep a civil tongue in your head, son. You're jumpin' at conclusions; you're off half-cocked. Suppose for a change you shut up an' listen awhile. Go ahead, Lat."

◆ ◆ ◆

SMARTING, Greg glared at the smirking detective and sat down. Bergdoll shrugged. "Sorry for my part in the ruckus, gents. As I was pointin' out, this agent of Carns' has interested the railroad. But before they play with him, he's gotta discredit the system of competitive bidding and the letting of private contracts that has built all the railroads in the United States. Bluntly, he's got to prove that the old way retards the day when big revenues begin to filter back to the stockholders. He can do that best by makin' you forfeit your time completion bond."

"An' that explains why Carns is interfering with his own work, don't it?" blazed Greg. "I suppose he wants to forfeit his bond."

"Small potatoes," smiled the detective. "Dropping thousands to make millions. He'll not let Prairie Construction or anything else stand in his way."

"Before I got excited," growled Greg, "I'd want proof that you ain't got a stake in stirring up trouble. But suppose you're right about all this. What you suggesting be done about it?"

"If you don't uncover Carns and break him, he'll break you."

"And that means—?"

"War! You've gotta fight back—or quit."

"According to some, we have fought back—in kind." Greg ran his glance along the line of troubled men. "Have you heard that three men, claiming to be paid by Tom McClennon, raided Carns' Camp Nine, killed the clerk and stole important money?"

"That's a damned lie!" raged Tom McClennon.

"Part of the Carns plan," explained the detective. "And you gulp down their lies. Your son is not on your side, Tom; that's plain."

"From here out," said Greg, brashly, "I'm fighting my own battles, not those stirred up by a discredited badge toter with a dull axe to grind."

He stalked stiffly from the room and entered his quarters, where he packed his things in two telescope valises and crawled into bed. Tomorrow, he thought, he would be well out of this mess. Yet he felt a pang of remorse that he was not sticking by his hard-working, courageous father.

Greg woke in the early dawn and rose instantly. His father snored softly in the bunk across the room. Down on the tracks he could hear the engine crew getting up steam. He dressed quietly, took a last look about the familiar quarters, picked up his grips and let himself out into the crisp half-light. Moments later he was in the engine cab, fraternizing with engineer and fireman, counting the clicking of the rails as they sped toward Mescalero.

The sun was an hour high when they rolled into the town. When the train had shuddered to a halt alongside the shackling warehouse of the Prairie Construction Company, Greg shook hands with the trainmen. "I'm going to Denver," he confessed, "and from there the gods know where. I won't be back. It's got to a point where dad needs buzzards like Lat Bergdoll more than he does me. I haven't told him I was leaving. If he asks, you tell him, will you? And tell him if he ever really needs me, to write me care of the Mountain House, Denver. They'll forward the mail and I'll come. Good luck, boys."

Their farewells were not genial and there was something of condemnation in their manner as they watched him stride to the station to get tickets. The train of coaches stood beyond the station. The palace car, a doubtful luxury for the infant patronage of the Colorado-Southwestern, was untenanted save for a drowsy negro porter and the girl sitting at the center of the car. As Greg handed the colored man his grips and walked toward her, Kitty Carns rose with a little cry and rushed to him. For a long moment they clung together, then. . . .

"I was so afraid, Greg, that something would come up to hold you. It—it was even worst than I thought. Dad was furious and told me never again to look to him for anything. It took courage, Greg, almost more than I had."

"Of course," he gruffed. "I didn't suppose you'd tell him. It would have been easier all around to just leave, and let time heal the wounds." He sat down with her, hard pressed for the words of comfort so necessary to her. The porter came pussy-footing down the carpeted aisle, smiling, rasping his hands together.

"You-all Mistuh McClennon, suh?" he asked.

"Greg McClennon, yeah. What is it, boy?"

"Gent'mun outside to see you, suh. Asks would you please to come out an' talk fo' just a minute, Mistuh McClennon, suh."

"Who is it?"

"Ah dunno, suh. He didn't say."

Greg turned to Kitty, who was nervously peering out the window. "I'll go see who it is, honey. Be right back."

"Careful, Greg," she warned him. "It might be somebody who—"

She let it drop there, but her fear lit first doubt in Greg's mind about this man who wanted him outside. He walked the length of the car to the vestibule and stepped off, looking about curiously. Two men, flattened against the car, turned to face him. One said: "You Greg McClennon?"

"That's me." Greg noticed they were strangers, alike as brothers. Short necked, thick shouldered men with great, arms tapering to meaty, powerful hands. The things that warned Greg as they came on were the pallid scars of conflict against their weathered faces. "I don't know you. What do you want of me?"

The heavier of the pair stepped before his mate, smiling, fishing in his pocket with his left hand. "Got a message for you here, Mister McClennon. . . ."

"From who?"

"From Kelly Carns. Yeah, here it is—" From close in he lifted a murderous uppercut that crashed through Greg's swiftly extended two-fisted guard, exploded against his jaw and sent him tumbling to earth.

CHAPTER THREE

The Storm Breaks

ONLY a fighting man could have rolled with that blow and so kept it from tearing his head off. But now Greg was on his feet, shaking his head clear of shock, lashing back at the big man as he came to his feet.

His swinging fist smashed against that contorted face. It tipped the man over and laid him flat on his back, where he roared: "Git him, Rocky. Knock his head off!"

And Rocky was bellowing his answer as he launched himself. "Easy, Nick. I told yuh to let me handle him." He was swinging back his hand for the finisher, and there was a weighted, leather-covered blackjack in it.

Greg hurled himself backward to avoid that skull-crashing bludgeon, went to one hand as the sound of running feet came dimly to his consciousness. Rocky missed the swing, the effort offsetting his balance and driving his hand to the ground. Bent like that, he had no defense for Greg's lifting boot. It took him under the chin, sent him soaring.

As Greg came up, he was conscious of authoritative voices bawling for them to stop fighting. He had a momentary glimpse of Kitty's pale, frightened face pressed to the car window as he turned to face Nick. The man bawled like a bull, his head lowered as he sprang at Greg as if to batter him off the earth.

Both fists swinging, Greg smashed into him, sinking a blow into his belly and rocking his head off the follow through. But Nick was as strong as a horse and one of his awkward blows found Greg. He felt his strength ooze away and the day exploded in a riot of colored lights. His ears roared and in him was the agony of great fists against his jaw, his neck, battering his senses out of him.

Then the roaring ceased and the lights were gone and into his vision was the terrifying apparition of a two hundred pound man dropping down on him, boots first. Will power alone drove Greg's shocked faculties. He struck those pointing legs aside and brought Nick down on top of him. He was slugging wildly at the man's face when Nick's legs flexed

and his boots lashed out, smashing Greg in the chest and knocking him flat.

Greg tried to roll away from the leaping devil whose contorted face clearly reflected the will to murder. But Nick landed on his chest and his fingers found Greg's throat. Greg thrashed, straining every muscle to break the deadly hold. His bracing hand banged against the little oblong bench the conductor had placed as the first step into the car.

His fingers closed about its edge and he swung it viciously, smashing it corner-on into Nick's face. Blood spurted and the hold relaxed and Nick fell sidewise to the ground and Greg rained slogging blows into his face with the corner of the bench until strong arms caught him and dragged him off his victim.

Greg was on his feet now, his senses cleared and he looked about him. The trainmen were clustered about him, awed and silent as they contemplated the two battered and bleeding plug-uglies. The station master was there and several men from the business part of the town. More were coming. Greg smiled, and the grimace did no credit to the name of mirth.

"When you see Kelly Carns," he husked, between labored exhalations, "tell him I got his message." He brushed himself off and painfully climbed the steps into the car. A frightened porter gave before him as he went to rejoin Kitty.

But Kitty was not there, nor were her grips in the basket above the seats. Greg turned inquiring eyes upon the black man. He said: "Her fatheh come an' got the lady, suh. She done raised a awful fuss, sho nuff, but he done drug her away."

Rage burned slowly in Greg. He looked at his watch. There was still twenty minutes. "If I ain't back when you pull out, George," he said tightly, "toss off my grips, will you?" He pressed a dollar into the black man's hands and quit the car, moving with long strides toward the Carns home, at the outskirts of the town. And as he strode, he looked to the loads in his revolver.

Greg had covered half the distance to his objective when he heard somebody calling his name. "Greg! Fer cripes' sake, Greg—wait!"

Greg whirled and saw the man running

toward him and tensed for a renewal of conflict. Then he recognized homely-faced Riley Bunch, Prairie Construction grade foreman, and relaxed. Riley was running and as he neared Greg noted that his faded work shirt was wet with sweat, his wontedly florid face red with the pulsing blood of high exertion. "What—what's the matter?" Greg barked, and a premonition of disaster stirred within him. "How'd you know I was here, Riley? How'd you get here?"

"I—I guessed what you was up to, when you showed up missin', Greg. I picked a Mick with a strong back an' weak mind an' we pumped in, on a hand car. Busted every known record, too. You can't do what you're figgerin' on, Greg—not now. Them lousy Carns people sent bushwhackers into the camp before daylight. They—they shot your dad, Greg!"

Ice ran along Greg's veins. "Shot him? Dead?"

"Not dead, Kid, but not fur behind it. He's callin' for you. That's why I taken a chance an' come here."

Greg knew a whirling moment of

agony, indecision, grief and rage, all mixed into a maelstrom of mental confusion. And all through it a condemning voice was saying: "If you hadn't left, you'd have been there. Maybe you could have saved your dad this. Maybe you could have killed the assassin."

With a mighty effort, he calmed the turmoil within him. "How you know it was a Carns man?" he demanded.

Riley Bunch sneered. "Still tryin' to write a clean bill for that outfit, eh Greg? Are you so crazy about the gal that you can't read plain sign? Any doubt in your mind that the two gents you just put asleep was Carns men? I just passed there an' they told me. We're all just as sure about the shootin'. I understand they told you they represented Carns. All right, the gent that shot your dad told him who hired him. Kelly Carns."

It left Greg with little argument, and with less will to argue. "I had some unfinished business with Kelly Carns," he said slowly. "That can remain unfinished. My new business with him can wait. Right now I'm going back to camp with you.

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And we'll bust hell out of your record. Come on!"

He led the way, striding so fast the short legged Riley Bunch had to run to keep up. And then, running from another direction than from her home, Kitty Carns came with a rush. Her lips were making his name and her hand was outstretched to him.

"Greg, Greg! They came and got me. Dad took me off the train and locked me in the house. I escaped. Is it too late to take the train?"

Greg's lips were loose and trembling, so strong was his feeling for her. "I'm not taking the train, Kitty. I'm going to camp to look after my father—shot down by Carns plug-uglies like the two that jumped me at the station."

She recoiled from a venom she had never sensed in him before. "Shot?" she murmured, and passed a hand confusedly across her eyes. Then, as desperation gripped her: "It's trouble, Greg. Bad trouble, and God knows where it will stop. But you said it was not yours, not ours. You said we would go away from it—"

"That was before your dad's outfit shed McClennon blood. It's my trouble now and I'll fight it till—till hell freezes ice. I—I'm sorry, Kitty, but this last blow raises something between us."

"It doesn't raise anything between us," she disputed. "Not if you meant the things you said to me. I didn't shoot your father. You didn't do the awful things the McClennons have done to us these last terrible days—"

"I haven't time to argue it," said Greg, tartly. "I'm going out to camp."

"I'm going with you," said the girl, with a combative pride that was not to be denied.

Riley Bunch said: "There's the Mick with the medico. Let's go."

They ran for the handcar, where the two men already waited, Kitty keeping pace with a graceful, free-arm run. She piled onto the car, daring them to refuse her. Greg was touched by her loyalty, her determination. A lump formed in his throat and he dared not look at her. Riley and the Mick took one handle, Greg and the doctor the other. The car fairly flew as they lifted it along the tracks toward rail-end.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Till He Squeals . . ."

A CROWD was gathered about the office of the Prairie Construction Company, a crowd without a glimmer of friendly feeling. They glowered at Greg as he came hurrying to the door, with the medico on one side, Kitty Carns on the other. He stood aside to let the doctor enter the doorway where Hudlow Pettibone, Cheyenne Potter and several others stood. Not until then did Greg look at Kitty. She met his glance courageously, took his arm and they moved into the cool dimness together.

There was need of a feminine hand and Kitty rolled up her sleeves, washed her hands and stood by to serve the doctor as he probed for the bullet. Grizzled Tom McClennon was conscious and he never so much as uttered a whimper as the pain poured through his rock-ribbed body. When the bullet was out and the bandages on, he turned his eyes to the girl.

"You're Kelly Carns' kid," he murmured, weakly and without spleen. "You had one hell of a nerve to come here, after what your outfit's done to me, but it's the right kind of nerve, judgin' by the way you've pitched in here an' helped. You've changed my feelin's about my boy squirin' you. You're all right." He held out a trembling hand and Kitty took it and then the doctor was interfering, sending everybody out. Having closed the door to the sick room, he explained:

"He's strong and gritty and he's holdin' up well. But he's in shock and it will knock him out very soon. He'll need all the strength and grit he's got then to pull out of it. He's badly hurt."

Nor did he exaggerate it. Within the hour Red McClennon slipped into unconsciousness and the battle for his life began. Throughout that day, Greg moved restlessly about, one eye discolored from the fighting in Mescalero, dried blood in the stubble on his upper lip. He spoke to nobody; indeed he seemed to see nobody. Kitty was frightened by his manner as she sat there in the office, alternately praying and listening to the faint noises coming from the room where the doctor stood guard against the Grim Reaper. Only

once did she venture to speak to the man she loved with all the fervor of her explosive Celtic nature.

"You've had no rest, Greg. Hadn't you better eat something and lie down for a spell. I'll stay. . . ."

He shook his head. "Not till I know how it's going," he gruffed. "If you're hungry, go to the cook shack." And he recommenced his pacing.

Late in the evening, when the purple shades of dusk were beginning to gloom the valley, the doctor came out, wan and gaunt from his vigil. "He's passed through his first crisis with flying colors," he announced, and his hand found Greg's in a warm congratulatory clasp. "I'm very sure he'll live, Greg, though it's in God's hands. I have done all I can. Now if you can arrange to get me a big pot of strong coffee. . . ."

"I think we can join you in that," said Greg, and the cold stone of worry no longer burdened his stomach. "Come on, Kitty."

She linked her arm through his and dashed away tears that were trickling down her cheeks. "I'm so thankful," she murmured. "He's a good man and this country needs his kind. He said I . . . I was all right. . . ." She wept openly and Greg's arm went about her slender shoulders.

As they left the office, a short-coupled construction engine came roaring to the railhead, stopping with a squeal of brakes. It was of the type used by the Carns Company and Greg stopped as if struck, scowlingly watching the man swing down from the cab, fire a question at two passing workmen who pointed toward Greg and his companions. The man came at an urgent run. He was still several rods away when he recognized the medico.

"Doctor Durward," he gasped. "Cripes, I'm glad I found you. Gotta take you back in the engine, got to, you understand."

"Steady," warned the medico. "What's the matter, man?"

"Man shot the chief, about an hour ago. Tell you all about it as we travel. Feller jumped on a horse and almost got away. One of our boys brought him down with a long rifle shot. He's dyin' . . . mebbey dead." His eyes flicked to Greg and his voice was suddenly curt and challenging:

"A good jolt of whiskey got him alive enough to confess he was hired by the McClennon's to kill the chief."

"That's a lie!" blared Greg.

"Don't call me a liar, you—" The man squared off, dropping his hand to the gun holstered at his waist. Greg matched the move and the faintest spark would have unleashed further bloodshed. Kitty screamed, flung herself before Greg. The medico grappled with the Carns man.

"Don't do that," he cried, his voice muffled by passion and exertion. "What are you men trying to do; work me to death?"

Greg put Kitty behind him and his voice was thick with emotion. "Wait, Doc, before you leave. I'll be right back." He turned, running back to Red McClennon's office.

"Don't you excite your father with this," the medico called after him, but Greg didn't slacken pace. In a surprisingly few seconds, he was running toward them again, his face dark with fury.

"Just a sample of what these Carns people are pulling," he barked. "Dad says it's a black lie, and I'll take his word for it. Doc, I want you to do something for me. If that bushwhacker's alive, find out who he is. There's something very fishy about all this."

"Sure, you'd say so," snapped the Carns man. "You think your dad or any other man would admit he'd hired a murderer done."

Greg smashed him in the mouth, knocked him down. And again the medico intervened to keep the infuriated McClennon off his foe. War was in the air and its contagion spread to Kitty Carns, whose sole interest up until now had been in escaping the drag of this trouble. She flared at Greg. "You should be ashamed, hitting him like that. How can you blame him, if the fellow confessed that the McClennons hired him? Doctor, I'm going in with you. Father said if I ever went with a McClennon to never come back. But he needs me and I'm going."

"Forgetting," said Greg, bitterly, "that you and I were going to keep apart from all this."

"Did you remember it, Greg?" she fired back. "Only until your flesh and blood was struck down. Well, my father is

down, maybe dying. I'm going to him." "Go on, go on!" cried Greg, and turned back to the office. He didn't look after them when they left. He felt like a man who has suffered a disastrous personal defeat.

As Greg dozed in his chair, where he held vigil beside the bed of his gravely stricken sire, he toyed with one thought. Kitty thought more of her father's side of a senseless argument than she did of him. It was fortunate he had found it out before he had married her.



DEEP in the night, Red McClennon sighed and woke up. He saw Greg sitting there, found his hand and smiled. "I've had many an argument, son," he said weakly. "An' many a fight. I've never handled one in any other way but man to man, fist to fist, let the Devil take the hindmost. An' mostly, that was the way of the men I had my differences with. But Carns—he's the sneaky kind that don't rattle before he strikes. All right, if that's the way he wants it, that's what he'll get. Soon as I can get up outa this, I'll carry the war to him till he squeals like a rat."

The effort exhausted him; he closed his eyes and presently slept again. And Greg murmured: "Till he squeals like a rat—amen. . . ."

The breakfast triangle waked Greg from a troubled sleep and he stumbled out into the early sunlight, blinking away the phantoms of a bitter night. Two things he noted at once. The work train was in from Mescalero, without its expected load. More important, a crowd of workmen were gathered about the engine and their low, ugly muttering held a frightening note. Greg hurried over, unnoticed as he pressed against the outer ring of spellbound men.

At the center of that ring stood Latimer Bergdoll, great in his time as a sheriff and lately employed by the Colorado-Southwestern as a trouble-shooting inspector. In past months his finicky judgments had made many a delay, many an embarrassment for the Prairie Construction Company.

He and the McClennons had come to

grips over a number of issues, Bergdoll always having his way. There had been times when Greg had believed the man was hinting to be paid to lay off. Greg had come to detest him.

There was nothing formidable about Bergdoll now. He was hatless and his grizzled hair was awry. Both eyes were black and blood oozed from one nostril. His eyes were wild and he gestured as he spoke in a high-pitched, excited voice. . . .

"... an' as soon as I heard they were gatherin' to take pay for the blood Ol' Kelly Carns had shed, I went down to talk 'em out of it. They were drinkin' an' workin' up to a pitch of fightin' anger. They wouldn't listen. They allowed they was takin' the McClennon train, loadin' two-three hundred men an' comin' out here to burn this camp to the sills an' pick handle you boys clean out of the valley."

"When I threatened to turn the law an' the full weight of the Colorado-Southwestern against them, they jumped onto me an' beat me up. I managed to get away before they killed me, warned your train crew an' we got out just ahead of the mob. . . ."

He looked expectantly at the locomotive engineer, who nodded vigorously. "He ain't lying, boys. Mescalero is swarming with Carns men and they're riled like bees. And more coming in from their camps every minute. Looks like we better sand-bag the camp and fort up for a finish fight." His eyes lanced through the ranks of the muttering workman and found Greg. "McClennon, how many guns you got that can be used against them pirates?"

Ice faced, Greg broke his way through to face the battered detective. "When are they hitting us?"

"Somewhere about noon. They're waiting for men to get in from their Camp Nine, where they claim a McClennon man killed the clerk an' got away with money from the safe. Yep, it should be about noon. You've got time to get good an' ready to put the crusher onto them, though I never was a man to advise fightin' a defensive battle."

"We won't." Greg's face was a cold, unreadable mask. "We'll take the war to Mescalero. If they're so blood sweating

when we get there, they can have it. Now get in to breakfast, everybody."

There was a rush for the great eating tent, Greg remaining behind to instruct the trainmen regarding making up the necessary string of cars. Bergdoll stayed with Greg, plainly pleased at the war spirit that was sweeping the workmen. "Frankly," he beamed, "I'm surprised, Greg. I'd about lost hope that you'd amount to much. But now that your dad is down, the McClennon is coming out in you. Your company's to be congratulated in having such leadership to fall back on."

"Save your compliments," snapped Greg. "Men are going to die today and I'm not proud of having any part in it. Then too, I'm thinking about the women of Mescalero."

"The town's for Carns and his hoodlums, body, soul, guts an' feathers. You needn't have no scruples, Greg."



GREG didn't answer as he led the way into the eating tent. Afterward he was too desperately busy to talk much with anyone. He delegated fifty men to remain at the camp to protect property and the life of helpless Red McClennon. They were to be under the leadership of Riley Bunch, who was bitterly disappointed to be left behind, and they had ten rifles and plenty ammunition. There were only forty rifles for the invading force. Forty rifles and a few pistols for four hundred warriors. The rest were outfitted with pick handles—deadly weapons in the hard hands of the Mick workmen.

After a brief review of the risks involved, Greg decided not to excite his father and perhaps retard his recovery. "Keep him comfortable as possible," he told Riley Bunch. "Tell him I went out

after meat; tell him anything except the truth. And if I don't come through this, don't breathe a word of it to him till he's out of pain or danger." His face grew bleak. "He's already paid dear for such mistakes as he's made. So long, Riley."

He shook hands and strode for the cars, where the McClennon warriors were already piling on. And Riley Bunch, staring after him, muttered: "Now what the hell did he mean by that? God knows, the word Lat Bergdoll brought should have took all that fool prejudice out of his mind."

Bergdoll awaited him at the tracks. He flashed a bold smile and stuck out his hand. "Best of luck to you, Greg. Clean up on those devils and you'll earn the gratitude of the railroad as well as every decent man and woman in this valley. You can do it. I'll stay here an' help clean 'em up if they should attack the camp."

Greg withheld his palm. "You're not staying, Bergdoll. You're going along with us."

The man's grin faded and he recoiled from Greg's dead seriousness. "What you mean, Greg? What's the idea?"

"We're forced so far to take your word for everything, Bergdoll. That's not grounds enough to start a war on. You're going with us, to be on the ground when the right an' wrong of this is thrashed out. Climb aboard."

"No—I'll be damned if I will. This ain't my fight, McClennon. It's . . ."

From long habit, when crossed, his hand slid to the black butt of the big gun at his thigh. Greg leaped, his right fist flashing. He caught the detective on the point of the jaw, knocked him flat. He leaped on him as he fell, wrenched the gun from his grasp and stuck it into his waistband. Then he lifted the struggling man, heaved him onto the flatcar, where ready hands caught him.

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"Shur-r-re, an' if it's lies he's been after fadin' us," shouted an Irish track-hand, "the devil will take his sowl, be me faith. Don't worry about him gittin' loose, Greg me bye."

Greg nodded and went to the engine and gave the word. With a blast of its whistle, an outpouring of smoke and steam and cinders and a gathering spinning of wheels, the train moved toward Mescalero. . . .

It was eleven thirty when the McClen-non train rolled slowly, cautiously into the environs of Mescalero. Sunlight laid its hard yellow glare along Fort Street. The situation was as crystal as glass, and even Greg was surprised. No wall of men lined up to resist their entry. No shot rang out its challenge to battle. Yet the town was filled with Carns men and they lined the north side of the street, their ranks thinning the farther they got from the Palace Saloon. And there was a sullen tenseness about them that spoke eloquently of their inner feelings.

The train came to a halt and the men jumped off, silent and determined now that the test was imminent. They stood there, looking at Greg as good soldiers ever look to their leader before the shock of battle.

"Slow and easy and calm, boys," he counseled, in a voice that traveled a long way in the unwonted silence. "Hold to the south side of the street. No drinking. No fool lip challenging. Keep your mouths shut and your eyes and ears open. Just line the street and stand by till I thrash out a few points. If one of you shoots before they start-it, or before I give the word, I'll kill him without mercy. Bergdoll, we'll stay with me. All right, men; take your places and remember, wait for my word."

With Greg leading, and the sulky detective shuffling alongside him, the men made an orderly file, their boots and brogans waking a sullen thunder in the town. A hundred hard men came to the north walk, to glare and to flaunt the menace of their guns. And Greg, watching everything with cool attentiveness, reasoned there were many more inside the saloons, awaiting only the word to send them into deadly conflict.

Four hundred men make quite a show-

ing, spread out along that many feet of street. Greg McClennon, poised in the middle of that spread with a hundred and fifty of his best fighting men on either side of him, realized that for all his advantage in numbers, the odds were against them. In weapons, firearms, the hundred men they faced outweighed them two to one. Never mentioning those in reserve, behind doors. That lethal strength must surely settle the issue, if it came to a fight.

Now boot echoes gave way to a singing, breathless tension. Greg sensed that not himself but Lat Bergdoll made the puzzle to those across the street. Beside him sounded the hard rise and fall of Bergdoll's breathing.

The man was under fearful stress and Greg tightened his hold on his arm lest he make some desperate move. Behind him, rising like fumes, was the controlled rage of his angry warriors. The situation was dynamite and Greg was overlooking no bets to keep fire away from the fuse.

Closing his mind to the thought of his gamble failing, he pulled Lat Bergdoll off the walk, moved toward the center of the street.

"What the hell you draggin' me into?" growled the shaken detective.

"You'll see, Bergdoll. Just want you to be sure an' hear everything that's said." He halted, ran his eyes along the grim line half a street's width ahead. "Who speaks for the Carns Company?" he shouted. "Step out!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Breed of Battle

FOR a dragging moment there was only grim unresponsiveness. Then a hulking man stepped off the north walk, head pulled down into his shoulders as he brushed the sleeves back from his thick wrists. "I'll do the necessary talkin', feller," he barked, and shuffled slowly forward. Rocky Gillick, whom Greg had once before vanquished, bore ample evidence of that lost encounter, and his battered face reflected only a strong will for revenge. "Spit out what you gotta say before I mop up the street with yore carcass."

"The mopping can wait," snapped

Greg. "But first, why did you beat Mister Bergdoll when he tried to talk you out of attacking us?"

Gillick was astonished, swiveled his glance at his backers. "Hear him, boys? A lousy McClennon trick, puttin' onto us what he done hisself." He eyed Greg witheringly: "It won't do, McClennon. Bergdoll told us you beat him up when he threatened to tell us you was gonna smash us. Well, start smashin'. But first, let's me an' you finish a piece of unfinished business."

"In good time, Gillick. Bergdoll gave us both the same yarn. Why, you reckon?"

Gillick lowered at Bergdoll. "You louse, if I thought—" Then recovering himself: "Hey—more trickery, McClennon. What reason would Bergdoll have for that?"

"To earn a cost-plus exclusive from the railroad. Under name Jonathon Burton."

"Hold on, McClennon! Bergdoll said Burton was your dad's proxy."

"He told us Burton was Kelly Carns' stooge. Listen, Gillick! What sort of looking man was the one that held up your Camp Nine?"

Rocky licked his lips. "Fine thing, you askin' that. Just one thing we've got our rope ready to hang—a gent with a red scar across his throat an' up the side of his face. Somebody just missed cuttin' his weazen; we won't miss, brother."

"You're saved the trouble, Gillick. You'll find Mister Scarface dead on the Purgatory Mountain Trail, where he tried to bush me. Him and another one. A third man got away without giving me a shot or a look. I'll bet that man worked for a friend of ours." He turned to the cowering man at his side. "Maybe Jonathon Burton, eh, Lat?"

The detective, securely held to Greg's side and silent until now, screamed: "You're a damned liar!" wrenched free and made a run for it.

Greg, turning to pursue him, felt Gillick's heavy hand on his shoulder, was spun violently about. "No you don't, my bucko fighter. Not till you've paid me."

"Catch Bergdoll!" Greg bellowed it as he squared off with the Carns bruiser. Somebody took his words literally, caught the running man with a bullet. A shot

split the silence like a thunder clap. Bergdoll screamed, spun and crashed, rolling to the north walk, limp, unmoving. Greg and Gillick smashed together. Gillick swung wildly and Greg ducked under the blow, lifting his shoulder into the man's belly, heaving him off his feet. Gillick described a wild, spinning loop in the air, arms and legs pinwheeling. He fell thus grotesquely into the cushioning dust.

Motion swayed the men of both factions off the walks. They charged to the center of the street. A gun blared lead into a building front and Greg, waiting for Gillick to climb groggily to his feet, saw Kitty Carns come hurrying along the north walk, her hands upraised protestingly, her hair blowing in the breeze. Her words were lost in the turmoil, but Greg's frantic yell sheered through the thunder of raging men.

"Woman on the street. Hold your shots!"

It struck into the souls of men and there was no more shooting after that. Rocky Gillick, having gained his feet, was bowled over by a rush of bronzed, fighting Micks. The drawn lines merged with a shock like two cloudbursts meeting head-on. The roar of conflict rose tumultuously, punctuated by the flat, meaty echoes of targeting fists, and by the profane expletives of straining men.

Greg stood planted, watching Gillick rise again to his knees, fall once more under the impact of a ruthless trackman's brogue. He rolled, came up mad as a nest of hornets, was struck and staggered and put down for the third time.

Someone smashed Greg's ear from behind and he whirled to counter. And then the bell in the town hall tower began tolling, and the battlers—several hundred in number, ceased fighting to wonder about the fire signal. The sheriff, a weak and frightened man, bounced up and down at the edge of the action, yelling: "*Fire! Fire!*" at the top of his voice. Not the worst idea in the world, for it effectively halted hostilities, despite the lack of a blaze. And, before the men sensed the subterfuge, they were watching Kitty Carns hoisted into the arms of two brawny men, hearing her authoritative voice sail up and down the street.

"Stop it! Stop it, all of you! Listen,

men, we have all been tricked. There is no fight between the Carns people and the McClennons. Exactly as Greg McClennon showed you, it was Bergdoll. There is a railroad man here from headquarters, come to warn us that there is a conspiracy to ruin both companies. He brings extensions of time on all work, in order to defeat the man responsible. Now—"

"Bergdoll, eh?" A horny-handed Mick roared his displeasure. "'Tis a pack o' fools we've been after makin' av ourselves. Wastin' good drinkin' toime bashin' each others' heads while that shpalpeen's been laughin' up his sleeve. Look at him, squirmin' on the ground. He ain't dead an' what are we waitin' for-r-r? 'Tis hangin' him from a tr-r-r-ree I'd be afther helpin'. Come on, boys."

He darted toward Lat Bergdoll, who was rallying there alongside the north walk. And Fate ran with the Mick, for in his hand was one of the few pistols Greg had passed out to his men. Sensing a violence which would perhaps be a fitting climax to this day's tension and yet a blot upon them all, Greg yelled: "Hey, Bucko, none of that", and hurtled toward the fallen detective, knowing he was far behind and that the idea was catching like a flame to the ragged tempers of men in the grip of powerful reactions.

The big Mick skidded to a halt, leaned over and jerked Bergdoll up by the slack of his shirt front. And there, in plain view of hundreds of men, the one time town tamer showed the swift and vengeful temper that had made killing his delight. From somewhere in his clothes he drew a glittering knife.

Too late, the Mick tried to throw his pistol around. The dagger struck him in the chest, buried itself to the hilt. He was dead when he hit the ground. A rough, gusty roar beat from Greg's throat, washed away by the vast resentment of the crowd. Kitty Carns screamed and the two burles put her down and, being closest to the killer, made a dash for him. It was a reckless, unthinking thing to do, for Bergdoll caught up the Mick's pistol, calmly shot them both down and, in half a dozen sure steps, hurled himself to Kitty's side.

When Bergdoll laid hands upon her, Kitty fought like a tiger. Brutally, he

drove his fist to the point of her jaw, caught her as she sagged and, holding her before him as a shield, backed into a narrow slot between buildings and vanished.

The thing had happened with such merciless swiftness, scores of men stood rooted, Greg among them, and silence came to Mescalero.

Out of this stunned inaction, Greg was first to emerge. He drew, cursed and leaped across the walk into the slot. From the rear, Bergdoll fired, missed him narrowly, drove him back. To expose himself thus needlessly, Greg decided, was no good. The man held Kitty helplessly before him.

The crowd, coming alive now, growled ominously but remained immobile, lacking leadership. Greg assumed it. "Sift back," he roared, "and get around him. Keep to cover and no shooting, understand. Pinch him in and hold your fire. We must think of Kitty Carns."

Roaring, they poured back between buildings. And Greg took time to plan his best move. West of the slot Bergdoll had taken, was Garner's Saloon. To the east it was canvas sided Wong Soong's Restaurant.

The last of the patrons were leaving the barroom now, eyeing Greg curiously as he brushed past with drawn gun and entered. In the gloom of the cool, dimly-lit interior, the place seemed deserted. Then Greg saw the day shift bartender appear in the doorway of Garner's office.

The man's face was pale and his lips moved in some whispered warning. From behind him came Garner's blatted: "What . . . McClennon?" And then the saloonman had pushed the barkeep aside and stood framed in the doorway, his bony face set, his deep-sunk eyes flooded with unexplainable enmity.

"Get out, McClennon!" he rasped, malevolently. "When you come into my place with a naked gun, you're asking to be killed. Turn around and get out!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Fighting Blood

THE unexpectedness of it, and its unreasonableness, astonished Greg and for a moment disarmed him. He knew Garner as a cool, aloof gambler,

hadn't spoken a dozen words to him. Except for the town prejudice against the McCleNNons, perhaps, he could think of no reason for this antipathy.

"Keep your shirt on, Garner. I mean you no harm. I'm going through to the alley."

Cruelty and a dogged intolerance ran across Garner's eyeballs. He shook his head. "I'm damned if you do. Turn around and get out. You may bring your hoodlums in to cow this town, McCleNNon, but you can't buffalo me. Get out."

Greg's face remained scrupulously passive, though astonishment rankled in him. His strong native stubbornness rose strongly, and he was suddenly suspiciously curious of Garner's purpose. In the voice of one who wastes no emotions and never changes his mind, he said: "An outbreak like yours, Garner, hints at a reason. What is it?"

"Get back!" yelled the saloonman. "Back, damn you, or I'll—" And then, as if driven by a momentary and overwhelming lust, he shot his hand holsterward and came up with his six shooter. It took Greg by surprise and it was less the draw than the murder lights in Garner's eyes that drove him to the gun.

He was behind but he was desperate and he got the shot away even. Gun echoes slammed the saloon walls. A bullet flicked away the lobe of Greg's left ear as his own lead struck squarely home, catching Garner's swaying figure. The man didn't even groan as he fell.

Greg pivoted sharply as the door creaked open behind him. It was Ben Hawks, the taciturn steel boss. "Greg," he barked, and his gun was in his hand. "What happened? You all right?"

"Watch that door, Ben!" Greg gestured toward the fallen gambler. "Let no man pass it—either way." And he was running to the hall that gave from the rear of the barroom. One room depth, farther on, this corridor dead-ended into another that terminated at closed doors, at either side of the building. Perfectly sure of himself, he wheeled left—and saw Lat Bergdoll's face for a fleeting instant, in the partially opened doorway into the rear of Garner's office. The door slammed and the bolt of the lock slid home as Greg hit the panel, shoulder on. He bounced off

and he put a bullet through the lock and the door swung free. And a dismally grim voice came from the room behind it.

"Come and get me, McCleNNon, and get your death."

Greg said nothing, touching the door with his toe and pushing it gingerly open, expecting a shot. He could look the length of the room and see Theron Garner's polished boots, and the bartender standing there with sweat streaming down his fat face. Men were gathering at the entrances, Greg's roar holding them back at the rear, Ben Hawks echoing the order at the front.

Seeing nothing of Lat Bergdoll and his hostage, Greg said: "You haven't a Chinaman's chance, Bergdoll. Make it easy on yourself and give yourself up like a man."

"None of that slimy palaver," came the renegade's snarl. "Let's have your lead, if you've got the guts to try it. It'll never be the rope, I'll promise you."

"Turn Kitty loose and give yourself up," challenged Greg, "and you'll have your day in an honest court."

"Fat chance, McCleNNon. I'd never get to the street."

"On my oath and honor," said Greg. "They'll not lay a hand on you or I'll put a gun in your hand and fight by your side. Come out."

"Go to hell!"

"Then I'll come in and get you."

"You do, an' you'll die. An' this squirm-in' gal with you."

"Don't consider me, Greg," called Kitty. "Get him if you can figure a way. He's behind the iron safe and—ah-h-h!" Her voice was suddenly throttled and the meaty crash of a blow sent ice along Greg's veins. Gun ready before him, he ducked low and shot across the threshold, swerving hard to the right as Bergdoll's gun shook the room. The bullet went wild and silently Greg thanked Kitty for the battle she was putting up.

Now Greg was on one side of the metal safe, Bergdoll and the girl on the other—The renegade still abusing Kitty, his voice choked with passion: "You panther cat—"

It robbed Greg of his last caution. He stepped onto a chair that stood beside the safe. He slapped the front of the safe with his open palm, cried: "Coming at you, Bergdoll!", and dived.

As Greg arched over the littered top of

the metal safe and looked down into the cubby where the renegade lurked, he saw Kitty's face turned upward to him.

"Now!" yelled Greg, and came down upon him. A muzzle belched in his face. Lat Bergdoll tried to lift the girl as a buffer against Greg's impact, failing because Kitty, daring neither to hope nor despair, was falling upon the renegade with hands and feet flailing, knocking him off balance, forcing a wasted bullet and laying him wide open for the full shock.



SHOULDER on, Greg hit him at the base of the neck. All three of them crashed to the floor. They rolled. Greg was struck by whipping arms and legs, rolled under, his face gouging into the splintery floor. The fierce and fiery will to fight rallied him, gave him strength to execute another quarter turn. Chest to chest, the two men lay gripped, Greg's gun arm locked and impotent, his left struggling to block Bergdoll's right arm, and failing.

He wrenched and heaved, carrying Bergdoll to a like position. He lurched to his feet, fighting off that stabbing gun, with the renegade locked to him like a leech. He had his right arm about Bergdoll, but could not use the weapon because of the detective's grip on his wrist. He heaved his foe off the floor, whirled him and drew up his foot, driving.

It drove Lat Bergdoll back, broke each the hold upon the other. The renegade was lifting his weapon even as he stumbled backward. Greg's gunhand, numbed by pressure against the artery, was not totally responsive to his will as he tilted the muzzle.

Gun explosions rocked the walls. Greg, smashed back against the cabinet, saw a kaleidoscope of dancing colors and would have fallen save for the support at his back. A black void reached out for him and through a befogged vision he saw Kitty Carns rush Bergdoll, a light chair upraised. He saw the man dodge the blow, smash the girl brutally in the face. She fell sprawling, never so much as whimpering, and the renegade's attention came back to Greg, his gun sweeping sharply

around to Greg for the crushing finisher.

Greg sighed weakly, shook a torrent of blood from his eyes and from somewhere drew a last fragment of tiger-like energy that carried his gun up against his menacing foe. The aim was nothing if not instinctive, and it scored. The detective dropped with a raging, frenzied roar, flattening grotesquely against the floor.

Greg slid limply down to a sitting position, and men were coming from front and back, crying excited questions and halting aghast at what they saw. Lat Bergdoll lay in a pool of blood, patently dead. Kitty Carns lay propped on one elbow, squinting at a paper held in trembling fingers. Greg sat looking at her, wondering what it was she read as he came out of the fog.

She glanced up at him, a grin like joy on her bruised features. Greg grinned back at her. "Hello, you bloody little she-wildcat. What you reading?"

"Hello, Slaughterhouse," she answered. "Got a letter, addressed to Mister Jonathon Burton, from the Railroad Company. Acknowledging receipt of information that the Carns and Prairie Companies are at each others' throats, with the work languishing. Asks to be advised regarding further difficulties."

"Ah," Greg saw a light. "Which explains why Garner took such an instant and violent dislike to me. Theron Garner is Jonathon Burton—or was. Nothing to worry us hereafter. Whee-ew! When you missed with that chair, girl, I sure thought we were goners."

"Same when you missed that first shot, Greg. Hurt bad?"

"Now. Split scalp and a hammering headache is all. You?"

"Nothing but a sore nose and bruised feelings. I think I'll live."

"You better. Somebody's got to talk for Carns Construction."

"I can do that." She laughed shakily. "With plenty of nice things to say about Greg McClennon, and Prairie."

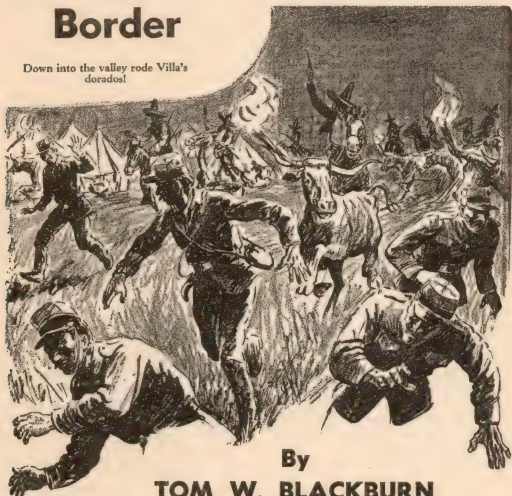
"Which will sound sort of tame alongside what I'll have to say about Kitty Carns and Carns Construction."

He reeled up, lifted her from the floor. With an arm about her, he led her through the ranks of grinning warriors.

THE END

Scourge of the Brimstone Border

Down into the valley rode Villa's dorados!



By
TOM W. BLACKBURN

Even the great Pancho Villa couldn't call Pepe a little rabbit and kick him into the dust. He'd show Cousin Pancho that a rabbit could be both a fox and a lion—even if he had to rout, single-handed, the whole Federalista Army!

THE GRANDFATHER was a burden to the patience of Pepe Amalia. Was it the will of the gods that this war must rob *all* men of peace? There was no justice to it. The old one was a fool—even more of a fool than that cousin whom men called Pancho Villa; that cousin who had made this war with his own hands.

Like Pancho, the grandfather made

much talk of Mexico. His voice chafing like an axle of a rusty wagon, the old one neglected the few poor cattle Pepe had run up from the valley below to talk long of the motherland. *Ai!* What was Mexico but a thousand valleys like the one below these hills and a million arid slopes like these barren ones to which the war had driven Pepe and his cattle?

A man could use but one valley and one range of hills. Was he not a fool to concern himself over others? Was it not folly to go down against the *federales* troops and die for land he had never seen? Assuredly. Yet the grandfather talked on and out in the sage green to the southward, cousin Pancho fought ever more stubbornly.

Pepe scattered their supper fire with the caution which war brings to even men who scorn fighting. The grandfather stared down into the valley where many fires burned boldly and without fear.

"I watched carefully today, Timid One," the old man said. "Ai! Those *federalistas* camped down there—roosters, puffed with pride. A hawk could take them easily. If Pancho would come—ha!—a blow for liberty. Pancho is not so far way. This peak behind us, now. A signal fire there could be seen to the south. We could build it. And when Pancho came, for a certainty he would give us, out of gratitude, a place beside him in the front rank of his warriors. Ai! That would be glory enough for an old man and a tender of cattle!"

There was a gentleness in the soul of Pepe Amalia; for he was a man of the soil to whom the lowing of cattle and the furrows of the plow were greater than the glory of the sword. But he was also a man with some fire, and there was an end to patience, even with the grandfather of his house.

"Are a rooster, yourself, *Abuelo!*" he snapped. "Blind, your feathers dragging the ground. You are no game-cock to seek fighting still. I want your silence. Below us is our valley. The *Federalistas* but camp for resting there for a few days. Let them have their rest and go on to find the cousin who makes their war. We want no battle, no ruin on our grass. We will have no fires. And we'll have no more talk. With the sun tomorrow we'll take our cattle deeper into the hills. Let the makers of wars fight them!"

The grandfather's old eyes snapped angrily. But he held his tongue. And it was well he did. For he took his bread from Pepe's table and his loyalty lay to the gaunt cattle and not with wild ones who would make peace at the cost of blood and ruin.

It was bitter work in the blazing morn-

ing sun to work sixty hungry, thirsty cattle deeper into the brassy hills, farther away from the dry, sun-cured grass and the cool water of the valley below. It was doubly bitter since the moving had to be done as a man sneaks past a vicious dog—without letting the soldiers camped below discover that red meat ran on the hoof in the hills above them.

At sundown the cattle were in a little bowl high above the valley. A long, smoothly-slanting slope dropped from the bowl where they were bunched to the valley floor where the *Federalistas* camped. Pepe knew his herd was at last high enough to be safe. There was a little water in the bowl. And some poor shrub which would serve as browse until the valley was empty again. In the twilight he saw the cattle were bedding quietly and turned back to the tiny fire the *abuelo* had kindled for the evening meal. But the grandfather was not at his woman's task with the skillet and meal. He was squatted on his heels, staring far out over the flats to the south and east. Pepe squatted beside him and turned his eyes in the same direction. There, against the evening haze, and visible only from this altitude, a spiraling wisp of darker haze smudged the horizon. Dust! Pepe's breath caught in his dry throat.

The grandfather turned at the sound. The grandfather's eyes were ablaze with a light which erased the heaviest years from his lined old face. And he laughed. In the old man's cackle Pepe heard a confirming echo to his own worst fears.

Villa! Bandit—renegade—savior of Mexico. Villa the War-Maker was on the march again—and toward the valley of his plowman cousin!



THE GRANDFATHER cooked a meal which took most of their meagre supplies. He chuckled often and ate with great relish. But Pepe could not touch the food. The twilight lay long on the land and he watched the growing column of dust. Pancho was marching steadily. Far before morning he would reach the valley.

In the early hours of the night the grandfather came back from the lip of the

slope, from which he had been watching the encampment below.

"Grandson, I think a bad thing is coming," he said. And Pepe saw a deep furrow of concern among the wrinkles on his forehead. "I think the cousin Villa plans but to go through our valley on his way to Paso Del Norte. Could be that he does not know of the dogs below us. It is a narrow valley and the *Federalistas* lie at the narrowest point. If the good Pancho does not know of them, he will lose his men!"

"*Todos Los Santos!*" Pepe exploded in a sudden and shaking anger. "You chatter of men—men from other valleys—valleys we have never seen and care nothing for . . . when our grass is to be trampled and our stream is to be choked by fools fighting for glory! What do I care for the cousin and his men when our valley and the bread and living it gives us lies in danger! You are a fool!"

The old one stood up. His back was straighter than it had been for a dozen years. Pepe saw that indeed the grandfather was a tall man. His old eyes flashed fire and his thin hands were balled into tight knots.

"I do not fear for Pancho's men," the grandfather said softly. "Mexico will give the cousin a hundred for every one who dies! He fights for her, and Mexico is grateful—even if hang-tail pups like you cry of their own hurts! But if Villa, himself, was lost—ah! Grandson, it is not too much that we give our valley. It is not too much that we warn the cousin of the trap waiting hungrily under us. Since you love your gaunt cattle and a poor patch of grass more than freedom and your honor, I, myself, will go!"

It was brave talk to come from an old man already exhausted by a terrible day in the brassy hills. This thought came briefly to Pepe Amalia. And with it came a feeling that he had been perhaps too harsh

with the grandfather. He had a vague flash of pride that the blood pumping so hotly through the flushed old face before him ran also in his veins. But pride would not save his valley. He thrust all else from his mind.

"How many *Federalistas* are in the camp. A thousand? *Pues*, then I shall go—I shall tell the cousin that ten thousand are there!"

The grandfather grunted in angry scorn. "Si, you will go!" he growled. "But like a whining coyote! Hasten! I do not stop you or the lie you would tell. The cousin is a man who understands a coward. He will not believe your story of the number of the enemy. He will know you lie to save your valley. He will come on against the enemy—one thousand or ten thousand. But he will come cautiously. And that is enough. Go!"

Pepe Amalia, for all this thin farmer's body, had the iron of the old blood in him. He angled down through the hills, cutting eastward as he dropped to intercept the oncoming army of the revolution. He traveled swiftly with the swinging trot a man who tends cattle afoot in a barren country learns. And as he ran, he shaped his story.

For a certainty the *Federalistas* in the valley ahead of Pancho's ragged legions were to the number of tens of thousands and more beyond that. They had more than a score of donkeys with cotton-packed ears which carried little brass cannon on their backs. They had, also, the big guns on wheels, each pulled by four span of horses, to the number of ten. And rifles—a man could see the gleam of those fine stacked weapons, even from the top of the mountain! The valley was full of soldiers, and there were hundreds more spread devilishly on the flanks to either side

Ai! The story he made up as he ran

Tom Blackburn, gifted author of this story, has a vigorously colorful saga of the gunsmoke frontier—"Wolf-Branded!"—in the current issue of NEW WESTERN! You may enjoy that story—along with a rich selection of other high-caliber fiction, by buying that magazine today at your newsstand!

was a masterpiece. That cousin Villa was a devil without fear. A reckless man of violence who made a gamble of his very life and scorned all odds. But assuredly even such a man as the cousin would not lead three hundred weary *dorados* against such odds! Assuredly the cousin would turn hastily away from the valley home of Pepe Amalia and presently the *Federalistas* resting there would themselves leave. Let them meet then in some other valley. Pepe would have saved his own.

He smiled to himself as he ran. He saw in his mind's eye the solid face of the cousin as he heard of the terrible trap awaiting him. He heard the cousin's great voice sending the *dorados* scurrying away from this place of danger to their cause. And presently, just beyond the full dark of midnight, he dropped into the valley trail and held up his hand to the vanguard of a long line of ragged horsemen.

The long line halted with the eagerness of incredibly weary men for the rest even this brief delay might afford. He saw faces gaunted with many a long arch and bodies thinned for lack of even the poor food a valley farmer eats. He saw eyes dull with exhaustion. But even in the gauntness and the dullness he saw still a flame of grim, unshaken eagerness. And what he saw shook Pepe.

These men were not fighting for their valleys. The land of many of them had long been overrun and their need for fighting therefore long finished. But still they followed the cousin and sang *La Cucaracha*—the song of the cockroach army which would free Mexico. They fought for a dream.



PEPE AMALIA was a plain man with plain thoughts. Dreams were for dreaming when a man slept. Fighting was for something a man could see and hold. These were fools. Three hundred fools following a madman. Yet a fragment of their dream threaded into the heart of him so that when a short, great-chested man on a huge horse rode up to him, the story was dead on his lips.

The cousin pushed back the flapping brim of his dusty hat and smiled down so that Pepe could see his white teeth.

"Ah, Pepe, my little rabbit!" Pancho laughed. "I have looked for you this whole hour past. *Seguro!* And now here you are. . . . 'Keep away from my valley, Pancho. Me, Pepe Amalia, your cousin—I ask this. There is no war on my grass. All of my cattle would not feed your army. The dry wild hay along my creek would not graze half of your horses. War is a folly. Go north. Go south. But leave me in my peace!'"

Pepe heard his own protesting voice mimicked in Pancho's mockery. And a flush of shamed anger rose in him. Pancho laughed again, an ugly laugh.

"An old woman's curse on you and your valley, my cousin!" he said sternly. "We want none of your skinny cattle or your wild hay. This valley is on the road to El Paso Del Norte. It saves many miles. And to save my weary men one extra mile of march I'd ride through a dozen valleys like this one of yours. Out of our way!"

Pepe spread his hands. The tall lie about the enemy encampment was gone from him as though he had never thought of it. He knew suddenly that he could have never lied to Pancho—not when these three hundred grim men sat behind him, waiting for word to go on again on an errand from which few could ride back and from which not one would make a personal gain.

"Pues, cousin," he protested, "not yet have I spoken! Hear me well. Ahead in the valley are one thousand *Federalistas*, camping for rest. No more, no less. One thousand of them. They have horses. They have two small cannon. They have guns. And they are in the narrow place. Riding as you are, they could trap you all. It is better to scatter to pass this place!"

Pancho's eyes glittered angrily. "I forgive you that you do not ride with me, Pepe!" he said. "One of the blood must stay to tend the ancient grandfather. I forgive you that you bring a coward's white belly to a family where the blood is red. I forgive you even if you hate me. But this lie I do not forgive! These are not *peons* at my back, little cousin. I, even am no longer that Pancho Villa you knew when we plowed the same fields. We are Mexico. And Mexico cannot wait for a cowering fool and a herd of cattle and a patch of grass!"

The cousin moved in his saddle. One shabbily-booted foot shot out, pressed against Pepe's chest, and sent him tumbling into the dust at the fringe of the trail. Pancho's great voice echoed down the battered line of silent men.

"*Vamonos! Andale!*"

Somewhere down the line a singer broke out. Others joined him. And the Cockroach moved forward again without a single face turned toward the man in the dust.

For many moments a seething anger shook Pepe Amalia as he crouched beside the trail. But by the time the last of the singing *dorados* had passed him, it was gone. A great light was beginning to flame up in the empty place left by the dying anger.

The cousin had done much with his *dorados*. Men said he had done much for Mexico. Yet his work was surely done this night. Unless—and here Pepe's lips parted in a wide and eager smile. Ha! So the cousin scorned him for a rabbit and a coward! So the cousin thought glory could come only to fighting men—that a turner of furrows and a tender of cattle could strike no blow!

Pepe turned, reaching out a full run, now, and plunged against the slope rising before him. The *dorados* were weary. They would not ride fast.

The slope of the mountain was interminable. Occasional snatches of the marching song of the *dorados* drifted up to Pepe. But they should be silent. Soon they would be close to the heart of the valley and *Federalista* sentries would hear them!

Finally, he staggered into the bowl where the grandfather crouched. The old man rose and bounded across to him, cackling.

"*¡Ai!* And I told you this, did I not, my grandson!" he exulted. "The cousin would not hear your lies. A man without fear, he goes on to rout the dogs. And I, an old man too feeble to follow the war, will see it brought here under my eyes. We shall have victory, and there will be fresh glory for the good cousin of our blood!"

"The cousin would not listen to me, old one!" Pepe gasped. "I told him what was the truth, yet he believed me a liar. With three hundred men he rides against a thousand in a black valley bottom. And

he believes the way is clear before him!"

"*Purissima!*" the grandfather cried. "This comes of avoiding just war! Had you believed with the cousin and the thing he fights for, he would have believed you! Now he is undone! But we can do something. There are rocks, here."

Pepe shook his head. "Rocks!" he snorted. "Rocks to kill *dorados* as well as the dogs of the enemy! Will rocks light that black hole so that the cousin can see what he faces? Light—"

Pepe stopped, a sudden thought stabbing him. "*¡Ai!* Light! For a certainty! Swiftly, *Abuelo*, brings me roots of creosote. Among the cattle. Swiftly!"



PEPE started for the cattle herd. And as he started, he pulled his shirt from his back and began shredding it into strips. The old one scuttled away from the fire. Pepe could hear him grunting as he wrestled with the twisted tangle of a creosote bush. In moments he came back, bringing knife-trimmed faggots.

Pepe sent him shambling back for more. Those he had brought, Pepe hurriedly began binding to the horns of the nearest cattle. The old one came back with another load. These Pepe took, also.

"Now, light a faggot at the coals of the fire. Keep a blanket between the flame and the cattle. And bring another blanket for yourself!"

The old man shuffled away again. When he came back with the blanket-sheltered flame, eight steers were milling nervously in the dark, a brace of creosote tied to the horns of each. Pepe took the torch, still hiding its flame from the animals.

"To the other side, *Abuelo!*" he called. "Make the other blanket ready. When the steer starts for the head of the slope, fan him with the blanket so that he runs straight ahead!"

Not comprehending, but with a dawning of new respect in his face, the old one went docilely. Pepe saw he was ready. Whipping the blanket away from the lighted torch, Pepe touched flame to the faggot on the horns of the first steer. The animal leaped wildly forward, carrying the beacon on its head with it. Pepe waved his blanket. The grandfather waved his, also.

The frightened steer plunged over the lip of the slope and started a wild run toward the floor of the valley.

Pepe touched another torch alight, sent another steer down the slope. Three more followed in swift succession. Then the others wheeled back from the fire which had turned their mates mad and bolted through the herd toward the hills. The rest of the cattle lumbered to their feet. They stampeded, but away from the slope.

"Grandson!" His voice was frantic. "The cattle! They go into the hills. Two men afoot can never bring them back. We lose them!"

"Seguro!" Pepe agreed.

But his attention was not on the herd, clinging rather to the five scrambling animals dropping toward the valley. The old one ceased his wailing and crossed to Pepe's side. He stared for a moment, then shook his head in admiration.

"Ai! The old blood lives in the grandson after all!" he exulted. "This is a brave thing. But five torches on the horns of cattle. It is not enough, *nino!* If the cousin is to take the *Federalista* devils by surprise, he needs much more light. Five torches will not show him even how many of the dogs there are down there!"

Pepe nodded again.

"The cattle run in fear, now. But our cattle have no heart for running. Soon they will tire and stop. What does a steer with something he doesn't like in his horns do when running does not serve?"

A bright grin flashed across the old one's toothless mouth.

"Ha! *Bueno! Bueno!* Only a stupid old man would not see it. The brutes will scrub their horns into the grass, trying to dislodge the torches. The grass is dry and will fire. There will be much light in the valley!"

"It was my plan. But only if the cattle grow tired of running will there be light from the grass. . . ."

He trailed off, watching the points of light dropping ever lower. Suddenly a shower of sparks flung upward. A moment later a brighter, wider patch of flame showed. Then another steer thrust its fouled horns into the sod and the fire took hold in a new place. Pepe breathed gustily. A wind was in the valley. It caught the

flames, running them swiftly through the grass. The blackness of the valley floor lifted in the red light to expose the camp of the *Federalistas* in a frenzy of fear at the fire.

Weapons were forgotten in utter surprise at this sheet of flame which had come down at them from above. And down valley, already riding into the light toward an enemy now helpless against them, came the cousin's *dorados*. A snatch of song rose above the confused shouting and wailing in the *Federalista* encampment.

La Cucaracha! Ai! The Cockroach—army of Pancho Villa! But the cockroach was not only marching at the back of a reckless captain of *dardos* along the floor of despoiled valleys. The cockroach was on the ridges and in farms and walking the furrows behind a plow. It marched even in the heart of a tender of cattle who hated war.

The grandfather touched Pepe's arm. A sad and beaten alarm was in his voice.

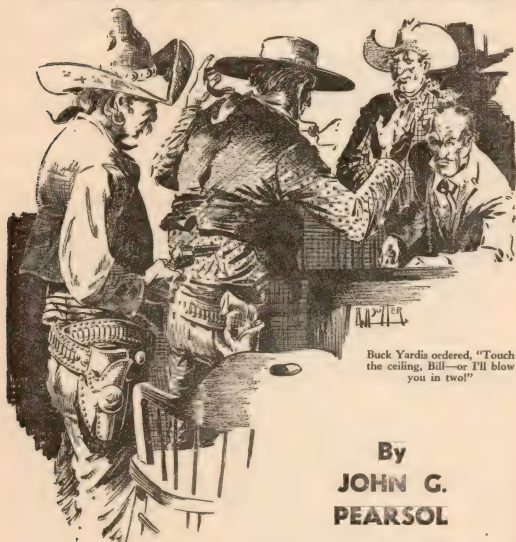
"We have been brave men, Grandson," he said sorrowfully. "We have warned the cousin and blinded his enemy and won him a victory. But now we have nothing. You can say that we will wait here in this valley, that the wild hay will grow again in the spring. But it is a truth you know yourself that the seed burns in that fire with the straw and there will be no growth in the spring. We are done!"

Pepe turned to the old one. "It is true we are done with this valley, *Abuelo,*" he agreed. "But so long as the cousin marches, is not all Mexico ours? *Seguro!* This you have said yourself. We will follow the cattle into the hills. Some we shall overtake. And we will drift as the cockroach drifts. With luck we'll find another valley where the *Federalistas* will come. And after them, the cousin. It is good that a man is a farmer, for he feeds the bellies of all. But it is also good to have one's battle when the chance comes!"

The grandfather looked a long time at Pepe Amalia. Finally he began to laugh.

"If I have lived beyond my years, it is only to have heard the grandson speak thus!" he said. "Come, we could start before morning! The cattle have no great start on us now. And I am not so weary as I was when the sun went down!"

TARNISHED STAR



Buck Yardis ordered, "Touch the ceiling, Bill—or I'll blow you in two!"

By
**JOHN G.
PEARSOL**



Bill Borden, crooked sheriff, held himself in the highest self-contempt. But neither a good woman's scorn, nor a past-due blood debt—could swerve Bill from his grim, and secret goal.



THE way folks had Sheriff Bill Borden sized up was wrong. He looked about thirty-five and was twenty-five. He didn't look like a crook—but he was one. His reputation was that of a cold, hard, calculating man but he was not that.

Bill Borden had deceived himself. He'd told himself for ten years that he was about the toughest, most unscrupulous gent on earth; denying himself the light of truth by saying he had to be that way to get money for his kid brother. He denied all concern for the good men losing their

ranches to Epp Olney, with Bill doing Epp's dirty work for him. And he was wrong about that too. He was concerned.

To keep himself resolute he thought constantly of his resolve to make lots of money for the kid, no matter what way; shutting himself out again from the truthful fact that he'd been scared ten years ago and was afraid he couldn't make an honest living. He'd made one failure and was afraid to try again. He was plain down-right yellow. That was the trouble with Bill Borden.

Bill sat on the porch that jutted out in front of his 'dobe office now, his long legs stretched out, his lids half closed, while a girl came down the street leading a little boy by the hand. The girl was Susan Brown. The boy was Jack Borden, Bill's ten year old brother.

Telling himself he was in love with Susan Brown, Bill reckoned when he had enough money saved up he would tell her about it.

Thinking of money again made Bill recall what had happened. When his brother Jack was born his mother had died. Their father had died a month before. Their little homestead ranch was mortgaged up to the hilt. Bill had worked like the devil to save it, but it couldn't be saved, mostly because of a man like Epp Olney working his crooked land deals. The cards were stacked against him. He was just a kid, fifteen then, and he was scared. So he had switched horses, figuring that men like Epp got the breaks while men like his old man didn't get them.

The girl and Jack stopped, and the girl ruffled Jack's hair and smiled at him.

Jack said, proudly, "Susan, you know what Bill's gonna do? He's gonna build me a big house and get me a fine horse with a swell saddle!"

For a moment Susan Brown's eyes touched Bill Borden's. She smiled fleetingly, showing him a little of both contempt and ridicule. She said, trying to put sweetness into her voice, "That will be so nice, won't it, Jack?"

Then she patted Jack's head and went on down the street. Jack's eyes followed her, watching her go into the restaurant she ran after the death of her father. Jack said, trouble coming into his eyes, "I don't

sabe it. Everybody likes me, but nobody likes you. That is—nobody but me. Why?"

The expression on Bill Borden's rugged face didn't change, but he felt cold inside of him. He lied, "It's because you're a kid and I'm grown up. When you put on long britches and go to work and try to make a living everybody'll get tough with you too. It's competition that makes it that way." But he could tell that that didn't make sense to Jack.

Jack went across the street and into the house where the Mexican woman housekeeper worked for Bill.

The blue, still tide of evening settled down onto the town, making the lean figure of one of Epp Olney's gunmen black and sharp as he came up and said to Bill, "Epp wants you."

Bill, rising lazily, went down to the saloon where Olney had his office, thinking enroute of the way Epp was gaining control of the basin. Epp owned the entire basin. He'd cut it up into small ranches and sold them to small fellows who had only a down payment. After they got going pretty well the gunnies and hard-bitten brush-jumpers employed by Epp Olney rustled so many cattle from the little ranchers that they couldn't pay. Then Epp got the land back and did it all over again with a new buyer.



EPP OLNEY was a big, blond-haired man with a flair for fancy vests. He sat behind a big desk and looked at Bill with a penetrating gaze and complained, "This Tex Young is getting' hard to handle. He wants to fight. We're taking the last of his cattle tonight. He'll probably come in, raising hell. You play up to Buck Yardis and John Bragg. They'll be out there."

Bill nodded. Condescendingly, Epp asked, "Have a drink?"

"I don't care if I do," Bill agreed.

As Bill drank, Epp opined, "Yu' know, Bill, sometimes I don't sabe you at all."

His face a mask, Bill sat his glass down, asked, "Such as?"

Epp explained, "Such as you never trying to buck the traces or askin' for more money or gettin' nosey, or anything.

You're just too dam' good to be true."

Bill looked steadily at Epp. He offered, "Did it ever occur to you that I might know where I get the jam to put on my bread and butter? I try to have good sense. If you make more than I do, that's okay by me. I keep what I make and after while it adds up to quite a lot. I learned about ten years ago that the best way to get along was to string with the fellow who gets along best. Here, that's you."

Epp kept on staring at Bill. He said finally, "That's all."

Bill started out, but staggered back as someone collided with him in the doorway. It was Nick Roget, another of Epp's gunmen. Roget gave Bill a push on toward the door and yelled, "Your house is on fire, Bill! Get up there!"

For a second life stopped for Bill Borden and he stood stock still. Jack was in the house. Then Bill began to run, racing through the saloon and up the street. The red flames were licking through the windows of the house. The yellow smoke poured out in thick clouds. Maria, the Mexican woman, was running back and forth in front of the house, wringing her hands and screaming, praying in Spanish.

Bill started in through the flames then stopped as a figure staggered out, a slight young fellow carrying someone in his arms. The young fellow fell in the street

and Jack sprawled out of his arms. They both lay there, limp, unconscious. The crowd scurried with buckets of water and sand to try to fight the fire, but Bill paid no attention to the blaze. He hovered anxiously as the doctor ordered Jack and the other fellow carried away.

The fellow who had carried Jack out was Bud Young, the son of Tex Young who had been mentioned tonight by Epp.

The doctor looked at Bud Young and shook his head, saying, "Bud Young is dead."

He examined Jack and said soberly, "Jack will live, I think, Sheriff."

Bill Borden didn't answer. He looked down at the blackened face of the youngster who had carried Jack out of the flames and swallowed a big lump in his throat. He felt a touch on his shoulder and Joe Hardin was at his elbow, saying, "Epp's outside. He wants you."

Bill went out and Epp eyed him curiously. He asked, "Jack gonna be all right?"

Bill nodded.

Epp suggested, "This kid, Bud Young. What he did better not put any ideas into your noggin."

Bill didn't say anything for a while. Then he said, "It won't." He really reckoned it wouldn't. He'd stood there for a while telling himself he shouldn't let anything stand in his way. He had to have money. Just because Bud Young saved

*MY, YOUR
TECHNIQUE'S
SMOOTH!*

*SO'S MY CHEEK-
THANKS TO KEEN
STAR BLADES!*



4 for 10¢



Jack's life wouldn't make any difference. Bill repeated what he'd said, "It won't make any difference." But he knew now that he was a liar. And he was afraid of Epp Olney.

Epp said, "Good! Because Tex Young is headed this way right now with a beef about a lot of his cattle being rustled."

Bill looked up and saw Tex Young coming into town, his horse dusty, showing the dark sweat marks as it came through the yellow squares of light that flowed from the unshaded windows along the street.

Young stopped as someone came out in the street, holding up his hand. The fellow who had stopped Tex was another Basin rancher. Bill knew he was telling Tex about his boy, Bud.

Tex dismounted slowly. He moved like a man in a trance and walked very slowly to the doctor's office. He went inside and came out after a while looking gray and worn and with something in his eyes that made them take entire possession of his face.

He said to Bill, "I've lost a lot of cattle. I trailed 'em. You better come out." He said it mechanically.

Bill nodded. He agreed, "I'll go with you. Right now."

As he rode beside Tex Young, Bill Borden wondered why Tex said nothing about the fire. Maybe Tex was bitter about that, knowing his kid had died to save the brother of the man who rode beside him. Maybe if he had said anything he'd have complained, "Why in hell did it have to be this way? Why not Jack Borden dead and my kid alive?" Bill hoped he wouldn't talk about it.

The moon was bright and the ride was long. The tracks of the cattle were plain as Tex Young pointed them out to Bill after they left Young's south pasture.



YOUNG said, "They're headed for the pass that leads down from Epp Olney's main ranch." Bill had known that was where they would lead, but he said nothing. They came to the pass and Tex started to say something when a voice from the brush asked:

"Is that you, Bill?"

Bill turned and saw Buck Yardis and John Bragg, two of Epp's gunnies, come from the brush. They had guns in their hands the moonlight glinting the length of the sleek barrels. The guns were pointed at Tex Young.

Buck Yardin said, "We thought he'd try to pull something like this, so we waited for him."

Tex Young frowned and queried "What the hell you talkin' about?"

Yardis pointed to a limp figure that lay beside the trail. He said to Bill, "There. The Mexican he killed. Me and John saw him do it. It's Garcia, the old man Epp keeps around for odd jobs at the ranch. He was ridin' up here and me and John was restin' there in th' shade. We saw Young comin' and watched both him and Garcia. With no warnin' at all, Tex pulls a gun, kills Garcia, then high-tails it for town. What reason did he give you for killin' him, sheriff?"

Bill answered, "He didn't mention it, Buck."

Buck said, "Well, he did it. We both saw it. We'll swear to it in court. Arrest him. He did it prob'ly because he hates Epp."

It was the old story. Frameup. Only this one would go the limit. Tex Young must have scared Epp to make him go this far. Usually it was a frameup on rustled cattle.

Bill said, "I'll have to take your gun, Tex. You're under arrest."

Tex Young's lips twisted bitterly, and in a blaze of fury he rasped, "Sure! I know! They told me not to buck Epp Olney. But I told him I'd fight him till my last bullet was gone. I meant it, and I reckon he believed me!"

Bill maintained an eloquent silence. Buck Yardin and John Bragg grinned.

Bill and Tex Young rode back to town, and Bill locked Young in a cell. Bill started away from the cell, stopped, then went back and stared at Tex Young's haggard face for a moment. Finally he said:

"I'm sorry about your boy." It was one of the few things he'd said for a long time that he really meant.

Tex Young said nothing. He stared at Bill Borden with all the hate and misery in the world combined in his eyes, the eyes so full that Bill saw nothing else.

"But I can't let me bein' sorry for you affect my duty," Bill went on hypocritically, "You killed a man. You'll have to pay for it."

Young neither spoke nor moved but he smiled knowingly, bitterly.

Bill went down the corridor, moving slowly, into the office. The smell of the wood smoke from the house fire still hung heavy in the air, stinging his nose. He wondered why he'd found it necessary to make that last hypocritical crack to Tex Young. He knew damned well Young hadn't killed anybody. John Bragg and Buck Yardis had killed Garcia. Epp wanted Garcia out of the way for some reason. They'd used him to frame Tex Young.

Bill made his way to the doctor's office where the doctor's wife met him at the door.

She shook her head, her eyes full of shadows, saying softly but firmly, "You can't go in, Mister Borden."

Bill's heart began to thump again, fear in him. He asked, "Why now?"

The woman said, "Jack's worse. The doctor's afraid for him. He's in there with Jack now."

Bill tried to search her eyes, but she shielded them from him. He asked, "You—you mean he might die?"

She said nothing. But her silence was eloquent, and quite abruptly Bill knew that he looked like Tex Young had looked. He knew he felt as Tex Young had felt. He turned slowly and walked in a daze up to the office, scarcely knowing when he reached it, his mind revolving about that one implication in the woman's silence.

Jack might die! That thought had never occurred to Bill before in all the ten years he'd raised him. And now Bill Borden seemed to live in a little world all his own, wherein no other thing existed except the awful fear that Jack might be taken from him.

He sat there for one hour. Two. He went to the doctor's office again. The doctor's wife was still there, and she still shook her head and said, "You better not go in just yet."

He saw the pity for him in her eyes as she stared at him, and knew she was trying to comfort him when she said, "If it's possible to save him, Doctor will do

it. You know that, don't you, Mister Borden?"

Bill Borden nodded, knowing the truth of that, but finding no satisfaction in it. Back on the porch he watched the sun peep timidly above the hills. Susan Brown came up the street and opened her restaurant, the sharp click of her heels loud on the boardwalk.

Bill rose very slowly, like a man utterly exhausted, and went into his office. From his safe he took some bundles wrapped in brown paper. He walked down to the restaurant with the bundles in his hands, went inside and laid them on the counter.

Susan looked at him, surprise flooding her eyes for a moment.

Bill said to her, "I want to talk to you, alone."

There was reserve in her. He saw it, and it recalled to his mind what Jack had said, "Everybody likes me, but nobody likes you."

Susan Brown said, her reserve unbroken, "All right, Mister Borden. Go ahead. Talk."

Bill Borden touched the bundles on the counter without looking at them. "That's money. Lots of money. Ten years ago I made up my mind to make lots of it, because the lack of it killed my mother, killed my father, and lost a ranch for me.

"I raised Jack, just me and that Mex woman, from the day he was born. I made up my mind he'd never be in a spot where he couldn't get all the money he wanted. I'd fix him up. I'd have him all set for life."



BILL BORDEN'S lips twisted bitterly. "But he was burned in the fire last night. He might die. I think he's going to die. They won't come out and tell me so. I waited and waited last night, expecting something to happen. But they haven't told me anything yet. But while I waited I thought a lot. It's the first time I really did think hard. All of a sudden I realized I was taking things from people that maybe meant almost as much to them as Jack does to me. While I set up there waiting for Jack to either live or die I realized that I was no-good and lowdown."

Susan Brown said nothing, but her eyes lost their chill.

Bill went on, "This money I made by cheating people like Tex Young. I helped Epp Olney run them off their ranches after he stole them blind so they couldn't pay him. I want to try and locate the folks who have lost places here. I'll prove they were robbed and help get their places back. The money, meebby, could be used for that. I don't want it."

Susan said, "And me—?"

"I thought meebby you'd do it for me," Bill said. "Will you? You know all the ranchers."

She nodded. Bill touched the brim of his hat and moved to the door. There, he turned and said, "Thanks a lot."

She still said nothing. As Bill left the door he recalled that in his last look at her, all he could see was her eyes. They were full of something he'd never seen before.

The street was still empty as he went to the jail. He went down the corridor and spoke to Tex Young. He said, "I'm going to get you out of this. Epp Olney told me he was going to frame you. He said Buck Yardis and John Bragg would do it. I'll tell that in court when it comes to it. I'd let you go now, but I want to wait and see how Jack comes out. I won't want a showdown—while Jack's like he is."

Tex Young said, "Thanks, Borden."

Bill didn't answer him. He went to the doctor's office again, and it was still the same. They wouldn't let him in.

By now the street was beginning to fill up. Buck Yardis came up and told Bill, "They're gonna try Tex Young today. Epp's in a hurry. He says come down and see him."

Bill nodded. He walked down to the saloon. Epp was in his office with Joe Hardin, Nick Roget and John Bragg. Buck Yardis came in behind Bill. Bill sensed something alien in the air as he looked at Epp's eyes.

Epp was smiling queerly, coldly. He asked, "You ever been in the room where Nick sleeps, Bill?"

Bill frowned. "No," he admitted.

Epp smiled more broadly, saying, "The walls are thin. It's the room next to Susan Brown's restaurant. Does that mean anything to you?"

They all grinned then. Bill felt something hard boring into the small of his back.

Buck Yardis ordered, "Touch the ceiling, Bill—or I'll blow you in two!"

Bill put his hands up. Buck Yardis took his gun, then stepped around in front of him and put the gun on the table in front of Epp.

Epp said, very sarcastically, "So you're no-good and lowdown. And you go mushy over a blonde-headed gal and run off at the mouth about how I cheat people out of their ranches. And you can't stand to handle my dirty money any more!"

Epp laughed, sharp and hard. Then he scowled, rose and reached over and gave Bill the back of his hand across the mouth, rasping, "I outa blow your liver out right now! I knew there was somethin' skunky about you!"

Bill felt the warm trickle of blood running down the corner of his mouth. His teeth ached from the blow. But he neither smiled nor frowned. Not a muscle of his face changed as he felt the hot bite of hate burn inside of him. To hate big Epp took some of the fear out of him.

Epp made a fierce, impatient gesture with his big hands and ordered, "Keep him here. Watch him. After the trial we'll take him out in the hills and shoot him. Joe, you stay with him," Epp motioned to Joe Hardin.

"What about him bein' at the trial?" Nick Roget asked.

"He had to leave town," Epp said. "On business. Anyway, he won't amount to anything. Yardis and Bragg are gonna swear they saw Young kill Garcia. That's very easy."

All but Joe Hardin tramped out. Bill sat up straight on the chair in the corner of the room and waited. He could tell the time by the clock on the wall in Epp's office. Usually they didn't hold court until afternoon, but he wondered about this one. Epp might rush it, to get it over with, partly because he was afraid of Tex Young and partly because of Bill Borden.

"When they gonna try Tex Young?" Bill asked Joe, "This morning or this afternoon?"

Hardin grinned, the wickedness of him showing in his crooked leer. He said, "It's all the same to you. You won't die

till after dark anyway. But the trial's set for ten o'clock."

The clock's hands pointed at nine. . . .

♦ ♦ ♦

NOW it was nine thirty, and quick impatience clawed at Bill Borden. They were about ready to try Tex Young. Bill Borden marveled that it was so important now—so unimportant yesterday.

Nine thirty-one! Nine thirty-two!

Bill rose.

Joe Hardin turned and faced him squarely. Joe warned, "Now don't git figity. It'll git you a lot of lead in your belly!"

Bill Borden walked slowly toward Joe Hardin and didn't utter a word. His facial muscles didn't change. But he was taut as a tight strung wire. Joe Hardin looked puzzled for a moment. His hand dropped toward his gun. Bill kept on, moving slowly, steadily, inexorably. He thought to himself, "What's the difference—lead in th' belly now, or after dark?" He had to keep thinking that to make him go forward.

Joe Hardin grated, excitement in him, "Git to hell back in your corner!"

Bill dove hard for his middle, a hard, sudden plunge. He saw the swift up-sweep of Hardin's gun, the red wink of

flame that tipped its muzzle. But he was under it, moving fast, and the slight burn on his shoulder filled him with quick relief and made him know he was safe as he hit Hardin and knocked him back.

Hardin grunted, swore. His gun rose, and Bill's hand swept up to grasp the barrel. He gripped hard and twisted back with all his strength, and Hardin screamed as the trigger guard broke his finger.

Bill stepped back, reversing the gun, holding it pointed at Joe. He commanded, "Drop your belt and other gun on the floor and step over in the corner!"

Hardin did it, hate and fear in his eyes, pain whitening his face as he had to work the hand with the broken finger.

The office door barged open and Bug-eye Hargus, the pop-eyed barkeep, stopped short. "What the hell?"

Bill ordered. "Come in here! Shut up and git over in the corner with Joe!"

Bug-eye did that. Bill took all the guns, his own and Hardin's, out of the room. He hurried through the empty saloon, knowing everybody had left to go to the trial.

When he stepped into the street he tossed one of Hardin's guns away, keeping his own and one of Hardin's. He saw them all up near the courthouse—Epp and all his lead-slingers.

Epp was the first to see Bill. He said something and they all turned, staring

ECHOES OF THE FRONTIER

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at him with undisguised amazement. A lot of people scattered, scurrying quickly out of range when they saw Bill with the two guns in his hands.

Bill Borden had never done much gun-fighting. He was cold as ice inside. That, he knew, was fear. Heretofore he'd had the power of his badge to back him up, to make men cave. But these men didn't give a damn for his badge. He was just a man with a gun.

Then he had no time to think because Buck Yardis opened the play by whipping up a gun and snapping a quick shot down the street. The bullet whispered past Bill's ear. He remembered hearing once that in a gun fight one good bullet was worth a dozen wasted ones. Take your time. Be sure you hit when you shoot. Don't be in a hurry.

Buck Yardis was in a hurry. He was spraying lead all over the country. Bill stopped dead still, raised a gun and took deliberate aim, centered the sights on Buck Yardis' chest and pulled the trigger. Yardis staggered back and fell, a slight puff of dust spraying out from his black vest where the bullet hit him.

Epp—big Epp Olney—the big boss that everybody was afraid of, was running, shooting back at Bill as he tried to get away. And Bill Borden smiled grimly, lined his sights on Epp and squeezed the trigger. Epp howled like a nipped coyote, went down and started to crawl behind a big rain barrel that stood in front of the store.

By this time Nick Rogert and John Bragg saw what they were up against. They settled down to business. Their bullets found Bill, knocking him back, but not downing him. There was merry hell whining up and down the street now. Bill had to fight back the almost overpowering impulse to hurry. His slow, deliberate aim chafed him, but he knew this was best.

John Bragg folded up like a jack-knife and fell on his head. Nick Rogert was sitting down on the seat of his britches, trying to raise a gun that seemed too heavy for him. He gave it up and toppled over sidewise.

Bill Borden called, "Epp! Here!"

Epp Olney popped up from behind the rain barrel and Bill was amazed at the utter dismay that broke over Epp's face. Then Bill unhurriedly shot out both of Epp's eyes.

A feminine scream rang out suddenly: "*Bill! Behind you!*"

Bill dropped flat, twisting, turning toward the saloon. Joe Hardin fired a shotgun just as Bill dropped, and a charge of buckshot whistled over Bill's head. Bill's gun jammed. Joe Hardin dropped the scattergun and fell back into the saloon door, his boots sticking out onto the walk.

Then it was quiet. Bill Borden reached up, took off his badge and threw it at the limp figure of Epp Olney which lay behind the rain barrel. He limped over to the doctor's office.

The doc's wife smiled and said, "Jack's better. A lot better. In a little while you can go in."

The weakness in him then made Bill sit down. He watched the men, basin ranchers, who came toward him. When they stopped in front of him, Bill said, "Epp Olney framed Tex Young. Get a key and let him go. I—"

One of the ranchers, Hank Jepson, said, "We've talked to Tex. He told us what you told him. We've talked to Susan Brown too, about gettin' the ranches back." Jepson extended the badge Bill had thrown away, "How about puttin' this on again? We'd like to know there's a square lawman in office."

Bill's eyes touched theirs, one after another. He focused his gaze on a pair of eyes brighter than any of the rest. They were Susan Brown's, and she smiled and nodded.

Bill reached out and took the badge. He said, "I've been a long time wakin' up. It's good of you all to look at it the way you do. I thank you for that."

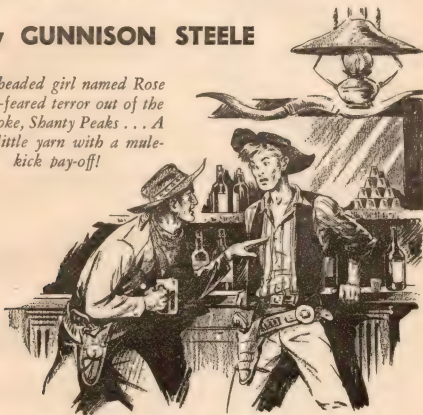
Bill Borden limped slowly up toward the jail to release a prisoner, thinking of what he'd seen in Susan Brown's eyes—and thinking of how great were the rewards that came of the bigger things . . . when a man felt clean inside.



GREENHORN GUNMAN

By GUNNISON STEELE

How a redheaded girl named Rose made a gun-fearing terror out of the timid cowpoke, Shanty Peaks . . . A lively little yarn with a mule-kick pay-off!



"You lookin' for trouble?" demanded Shanty.

AL SHADRACK was a fancy dressing gent, big and dark and arrogant. He hung about the saloons most of the time, gambling; but, after setting his cream Stetson for Rose Tully, Rose started smiling at me, and making he even worked a little. That was after her brown eyes say things I maybe wasn't supposed to believe.

Maybe that was what started the bad blood between me—Shanty Peaks—and Al. Or maybe it was the day I beat him at his own slick tricks and took a couple of hundred dollars off him at stud poker. It went from bad to worse, with red-haired Rose getting a big kick out of it, and both of us too stubborn to back down; so it finally came to this day when me and Al Shadrack met in Saddle Bow for a gun-smoky showdown in the middle of the street.

Now, I wasn't any gunfighter, and I knew it. I also knew that Shadrack was pretty slick with a gun for I'd seen him kill a man three months before. It was easy to see I'd got myself into a spot which I was liable to get carried out of in a pine box unless I wanted to fork leather and ride.

The showdown was to come at sundown. Word had got about and Saddle Bow was crowded. I had a lot of friends there who hoped I'd shoot Al Shadrack loose from his hide—and every one of them knew I couldn't do it. Shadrack knew it too and he was pretty cocky. He strutted from saloon to saloon, bragging loud-mouthed about what he'd do to me.

As the sun sank lower and lower, my spirits sank with it. I went into a saloon, thinking maybe a mug of beer would help. I must have been edgy, for when

somebody bumped into my elbow, spilling some of the beer, I got mad. I calmed down some when I saw it was just a youngster who'd done it—a slender kid, no more than nineteen or twenty, with a narrow, sun-browned face and weak lips. His clothes were old and dusty, his boots scuffed, his old hat floppy. He wasn't much to look at.

"Kid," I said, "Why in hell don't you watch what you're doin'?"

"Sorry, mister," he said. "I didn't aim to do it."

And I said, "Good thing you didn't. Another thing, you'd ought to be spanked for drinking that hard likker. Soda water's more your size!"

His pale eyes narrowed down and his weak lips curled, and for a minute I thought he aimed to flare up. That would have been funny. He wore an old range six-shooter on his left thigh, tied-down gunman style. It gave him a comical look.

"Maybe you're right, mister," the kid said, backing up. "I—I promised Maw I wouldn't drink any more. And I won't."

"See you don't bump into me ag'in, either," I said. I drank my beer and went out onto the street. The beer hadn't helped any. I stopped at the livery stable. Old Limpy Greer was my friend.

"Saddle and line out, Shanty," Limpy begged. "To hell with bein' a dead hero. You want Al Shadrack to kill you?"

I said I didn't. "But I won't run. Maybe something will happen. Al Shadrack is yellow—you can see it in his eyes."

"But he knows he can beat you, or thinks he can, and that makes him brave," Limpy pointed out.

After a while I moved on. The sun was still an hour high. Al Shadrack, I knew, was in the Silver Lady, the biggest and flashiest saloon in town. He was drinking, but not drunk. I heard he'd sent word to Rose Tully he'd be out to see her tonight, and I wished I could feel that confident.

I kept thinking about what I knew to be a fact: Al Shadrack, underneath his swaggering and bullying, was yellow. But, like Limpy had said, so long as he thought he was top dog the yellow wouldn't show.

When the sun was almost touching the blue hills, I crossed and went into the Silver Lady. A dozen men lined the shiny bar, with Al Shadrack standing at one end. The room got mighty quiet as I entered. Maybe they wondered if I aimed to jump the gun on Shadrack.

But I didn't even look at him as I crossed to the bar. I ordered beer. And as I turned I bumped into somebody, spilling half the beer. I turned, and saw it was the seedy-looking kid I'd talked to up the street a little while ago.

"Damn you, kid," I yelled, "what you mean bumpin' into me?"

"I didn't, mister," he denied. "It was your fault—"

"Like hogwash it was my fault! You lookin' for trouble?"

"No, I'm not. I'm sorry—"

"You ought to be," I hollered. "Another thing, that's whiskey you got."

He said it was. I grabbed it out of his hand and poured it into a cuspidor. I looked at the kid. He'd stepped away from the bar. His face was pale and his lips were curling down again. His hand was inching toward the six-shooter.

"Better let that gun alone, kid," I said. "You wouldn't have a chance with me. But if you're bound to try, go ahead!"

I could see the button's hands trembling. Indecision was in his pale eyes. Then I could see he had made up his mind.

"Yellow, just like I thought," I sneered. "Get out of town, kid, and don't come back. I've got a little business to see to first, but if you're in town after that then I'll tend to you!"

The kid didn't say anything else. He turned and went out the door. The room was still mighty quiet. Al Shadrack was staring at me.

I SAID, "I'll walk up the street in just five minutes, Al. If you're through shootin' off your mouth, maybe you'll come to meet me. And don't keep me waitin'."

I turned and went out. I went half a block along the street, to another saloon. I waited five minutes, and then I walked out onto the street.

Al Shadrack came from the Silver Lady. I saw him look toward me, and

then at his big steeldust standing at a hitchrail nearby. Then Shadrack stepped into the street and started walking—toward me. Only he wasn't swaggering now; he walked slowly.

I started to meet him. I felt pale and cold inside, and my feet were like lead. But I couldn't back down now. Shadrack was peering hard at me. I could see rivulets of sweat running over his dark face. He looked worried. He was just coming even with his steeldust at the hitchrail.

Suddenly Al Shadrack stopped. He turned slowly, like a man propelled by unseen hands, and stumbled toward the steeldust. At the last, he was running. He jerked the reins loose, climbed into the saddle and put spurs to the steeldust, and the last I saw of him he was leaving Saddle Bow in a cloud of dust.

I turned and went toward the livery stable. I felt pretty good, for I'd just found that it took brains as well as guts to beat a gent like Al Shadrack.

The seedy-looking kid had just led a saddled buckskin from the livery, ready to ride. It was plain he was in a hurry to get out of town. It made me feel bad thinking about the way I'd treated him.

"Whoa up, kid," I said, grinning. "You don't have to leave town if you don't want to."

He'd already climbed into the saddle. "Why don't I?" He looked at me in a funny way.

"It's this way," I explained. "I kind of had to do them things. I was in a jam. I had to match guns with a gent I knew could beat me. So I cooked up a little scheme, to make him think I was a ring-tailed terror and that he was really the one who didn't have a chance."

"I see," the kid said slowly. "You figured that, when he saw you chase me out of town, he'd turn yellow and run, too."

I said, "That's right. But wait till you hear the rest of it. An hour ago I had word circulated over town that you wasn't really a greenhorn kid, but a hellion named Bill Bonney. You know—Billy the Kid! When Shadrack saw me make you eat dirt, it cooked his goose. Ain't that a hell of a joke?"

"It sure is," the thin-faced youngster admitted. Then, as he turned his horse and put spurs to it, he said over his shoulder: "But I ain't just sure who the joke's on. You see, mister, it happens that I am Billy the Kid!"

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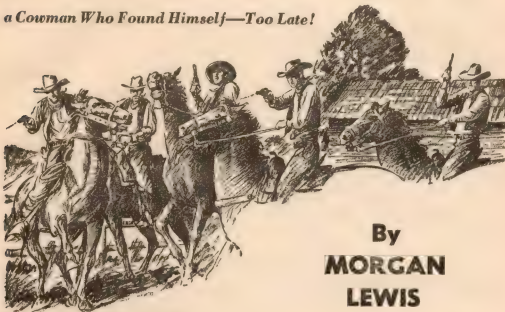


Will's gun-hammer clicked on an empty shell

Will Mason thought he could softly coast along on his dead dad's gun-glory—until all the human jackals of Powder Flats range cast aside their once-friendly masks and dug their avaricious claws into the mighty holdings of the Bib M cattle kingdom.

GUNSMOKE LESSON

a Cowman Who Found Himself—Too Late!



By

MORGAN

LEWIS

CHAPTER ONE

Hard Knuckles for a Sport

WILL MASON stepped out onto the porch of the Bib M and his blood-shot eyes swept the ranch yard. Evil tasting brown fur was an inch thick on his tongue and his head ached splittingly from last night's carousal at Powder Flats.

Joe Frobisher, his ramrod, and six of Bib M's crew lounged at the corral—and the sight tightened Will's black hangover temper.

He left the porch and walked over to them, teetering a little on the heels of his expensive, hand-made boots. His fine whipcord breeches and heavy silk shirt were stained with the whiskey he had spilled and his forty-dollar Stetson was crumpled shapelessly.

Joe Frobisher watched him approach, his eyes carefully noncommittal. He was a middle-aged man with a thin, quiet face who had helped Old Billy Mason build the fifty thousand odd acres of Bib M. It

had taken a man of iron nerve and body to do that; for Old Billy had slashed out his holding over the heads of dozens of lesser or weaker men. Frobisher had served Old Billy with a grim, taciturn loyalty that had carried right up to the end when the founder of Bib M had lost his first and last battle with pneumonia.

And now young Will Mason had inherited his father's holdings. He stopped a few feet from Frobisher. Mason's dark, arrogant, handsome face was flushed. "This is the hell of a time to start work," he said loudly.

"I was waitin' fer yuh to git up," Frobisher said mildly.

That inoffensive answer let loose the little devils of wrath that danced behind Will's aching eyeballs. "Since when have you had to wait for me?" he raged, and cursed his foreman in a thick, heavy voice.

Frobisher took it quietly, giving no sign that he heard save the tightening of the muscles that edged his lean jaw.

His very passiveness seemed to anger Mason the more. Mason's cursing took on a steady viciousness while the lounging

crew looked studiously at the ground. He paused for breath and Frobisher gave a slow sigh.

"I reckon yuh've said enough," he said quietly. "Old Billy made one mistake—he shouda tanned hell outa yuh." He turned and went into the bunkhouse and came out almost immediately carrying his warbag. He lashed it on his horse.

"I'm through," he said flatly. "Yuh can mail my wages to Powder Flats."

He swung into the saddle and started for the gate. On second thought he swung the horse around and stopped him by Will. "I was waitin' to tell yuh," he said quietly, "that Clyde Bittern is movin' his cattle in on yuh." Without waiting for a reply he wheeled and trotted out.

His last words cut through the whiskey haze in Will Mason's mind, but they didn't make sense. Who in this section would try to horn in on the might Bib M?

Will glowered darkly after the diminishing form of Frobisher. Three of the crew came up to him and he swung sharply to face them. Calico Pete, Baldy and Ed Thorjesson, all old-timers with Bib M.

"I reckon," Baldy said, "we'll be drawin' our time."

Will's glance searched their faces and saw voiceless disapproval written there. It was a shock to learn these men were quitting but his arrogant pride forbade questioning them.

"That suits me," he said harshly and pulled money from his pocket. They took their wages and went into the bunkhouse for their belongings.

Will swung to the remaining three. "How about it?" he asked curtly. "Are you quittin' too?"

Tim Bradley, a long, lanky puncher, shook his head slowly. "I reckon we'll stick," he drawled. The wiry Pendleton twins, Luke and Harry, looked at each other and nodded in confirmation.

Will spoke to Tim Bradley. "From now on you're drawin' foreman's wages—get to work!" He swung on his heel and went up to the house.



WILL MASON headed for Powder Flats late in the afternoon, Joe Frobisher's statement that Clyde Bittern was moving in on him lying light-

ly on his mind. Hell, Clyde was a friend of his. They had been drinking together just last night, and Clyde wasn't the kind to run a whizzer on a friend. Clyde Bittern was reputed to know his way around, and Will took pride in the older man's acquaintance.

Mason came onto the wide, pock-marked street of Powder Flats, following his horse's lengthening shadow to draw rein at the restaurant. The town was quiet at this hour and loungers drowsed on benches in the cool shade of wooden store awnings.

He left the horse at the rail and went into the narrow-fronted room with the counter at one side and tables at the other. For the last six months he had made a practice of riding into town three or four nights a week to drink and play a little poker and he usually ate his dinner here at this restaurant.

A girl behind the counter turned as he came in and his eyes lighted at sight of her. Molly Breen was more than enough reason for a man to eat here regularly. Her brown hair curled crisply about her smooth brow and her brown eyes were dusted with little gold flecks. Her nose was straight and slightly upturned at the tip and her red mouth held a full, generous curve. But it wasn't only Molly's prettiness that appealed; there was a sincere, direct honesty about her as refreshing as a cool prairie wind.

"Hello, Will," she said. "Steak?"

Will nodded and trailed his spurs down the floor to mid-counter. He sat wide legged on a stool and watched as she busied herself at the stove. When the steak was going she came back with a plate and cutlery. She put them in front of Will and he reached over and took her hand.

Molly slowly released it and stepped back.

"I hear you had trouble with Joe Frobisher," she said directly.

Will's dark face flushed. "I had a hangover."

Molly eyed him coolly. "That's nothing unusual. You'll have another one tomorrow morning."

Will evaded that. "Frobisher had no right to quit. He knew I wasn't feeling right."

A little spark kindled far back in Molly's eyes. "You've run things with a high hand since Old Billy died," she said, "and Joe has put up with you—but there are some things no man will take."

"I reckon I was a little rough," Will admitted.

"Are you going to admit it to him and ask him to come back?" Molly asked directly.

His face went blank for a moment, then he threw back his head and laughed. "Apologize to old Joe? I reckon not. If he wants to quit that's his hard luck. He had a good job at Bib M."

The fire in Molly's eyes had spread to her cheeks. "You admit you're wrong and yet you're not man enough to own up to it to Joe. Let me tell you something—Joe Frobisher helped your father build up Bib M. Joe's one of the best cattlemen in this country. If you don't hire him back, the Bib M will be broken up inside of six months!"

Will opened his mouth to laugh. Instead, he shut it and looked at her blankly. "What makes you say that?"

Molly went to the stove without answering and returned with his steak. "Are you running as many head as when Old Billy was alive?" she asked.

"About half," he admitted.

"And what happened to the rest?" she persisted.

Will swallowed a mouthful of steak. "Sold 'em—lost some last winter."

Molly hesitated. "It's none of my business if you don't want to answer," she said, "but how much of that money have you left?"

Will looked up at her and grinned. "Not much—but there's plenty more where that came from."

Molly looked him over for a long moment in silence. The anger left her face and she sighed. "If you can't see where you're heading," she said quietly, "no one can point it out to you."

Will put down his knife and fork and stared in angry astonishment. "Speak plain," he said curtly. "What's on your mind?"

"Very well, Will," Molly said swiftly. "You just lost the man who was holding Bib M together. . . . How long do you suppose the grass-hungry, small outfits

under the rim are going to let those thousands of acres of Bib M stand empty?"

Will's laugh was tight with anger. "There isn't an outfit in these parts that would dare to give Bib M an argument," he declared contemptuously.

Molly shook her head. "You're just an arrogant fool, Will," she said sadly, "and I guess you'll have to learn the hard way. . . . I hope it won't be too late when you wake up." She picked up the empty plate and started for the back.

Will slapped a coin on the counter. "I reckon I'm old enough to run my own affairs," he called angrily, and stalked out.

In the kitchen Molly stared unseeing while two large tears slipped over her smooth cheeks.



MASON had been drinking steadily. He was leaning with one elbow on the bar and his foot hooked over the rail when Clyde Bittern came into the Bull's Head Saloon. Business was slack. Bittern noted the two punchers at the other end of the bar, apart from Mason, and a houseman idly rifling a cold deck at an empty keno table. He took a table at the near end and called for a bottle.

Bull-necked, One-Eyed Casey brought over bottle and glass. Will carried his own drink over to the table.

Bittern looked up as Will slacked into a chair across from him. His smooth, flat-angled face was wedge shaped, tapering from flaring cheek bones to a narrow, aggressive chin. His blue eyes, set in the weathered toughness of his face had a hard, gem-like brilliancy. There was cool speculation in them as he watched Will.

Bittern poured a drink. "I hear your foreman quit," he said suggestively.

Will nodded sourly. "Didn't have sense enough to know a good job when he had one."

Bittern nodded guardedly. "That's the way with some men."

Will tossed off his drink and set the glass down. "Joe was tryin' to tell me that you're runnin' stuff on Bib M grass."

Bittern smiled blandly. "You've got more range than you can use," he pointed out, neither denying nor affirming.

Will's dark eyes fastened on his face with sudden intentness. "Have you moved onto Bib M or haven't you?" he demanded shortly.

Bittern still smiled but his eyes were wary. "Yes and no," he said coolly. "I'm runnin' some stock on the strip that borders me but that's free range—it's never been patented."

Dark, angry color crawled into Will's face. "Patent or no patent," he said fiercely, "that's always been Bib M range and it stays that way. Get your stuff off!"

Clyde Bittern leaned back in his chair, unmoved. "You're forgettin' that the two men who built Bib M are gone," he said levelly. "From now on you'll sing small."

That slur on his ability to hold his ranch was more than Will's headstrong temper could take. He reached across the table with a full arm swing and slapped Bittern heavily across the face.

At the sound, the two punchers at the bar and the bartender swung around to see Bittern come to his feet with a shove that sent his chair skittering over the floor. His face was a blazing white save for the mark of Will's hand and his mouth was a thin, straight line.

"I've been waitin' for a chance to knock your ears down," he said thinly as Will rose from the chair. He uncocked a right smash that took Will on the chin and drove him staggering across the room. His spur hooked a table leg and he went down, his head striking a cuspidor and spilling its contents into his face.

Will rolled over and came to his feet, pawing frenziedly at his eyes. Bittern came in mercilessly, the heavy, solid crack of his fists sounding through the room.

Blinded, Will staggered under the deluge of blows, swinging aimlessly and missing. It was a short fight; for Bittern could call his shots without hindrance and he cut and pounded Will's face into a raw, red mass. Bittern's face was alight with a wild, pleasurable anger as he systematically went about inflicting as much damage as possible.

When Will was finally knocked off his feet and unable to get up, Bittern leaned over and slapped him across the bloody mouth. "That'll learn you who's boss around here now."

Bittern went over to the bar and got a

towel from the grim-faced Casey, and wiped the blood from his knuckles. He tramped out, dropping the towel on Will's face as he passed.

One of the punchers took a look at Will and gagged on his drink.

One-eyed Casey lumbered over and picked Will up as though he had been a child.

CHAPTER TWO

Cattle Trouble

"**T**HIS'LL hurt," Old Doc Saunders said as he daubed antiseptic into the cuts. Will clamped his jaw and stared blindly into darkness. Doc Saunders had pried his eyes open and washed them but now they were swollen tight shut.

Will endured the fiery sting of the antiseptic with a dumb stoicism. It was only after Doc Saunders had finished and stuck a cigarette between the battered lips that he spoke. His voice was halting, uncertain, as though he were groping in his darkness for the answer.

"I can't figure why Clyde did it," he said slowly. "I always reckoned he was a friend. . . . Sure, I slapped him—but that didn't call for this—"

Doc Saunders walked across the bare floor of his untidy office and sat on the edge of his littered desk. His hooded, shrewd old eyes studied Will's battered face frowningly. "'Tain't right to kick a man when he's down," he said as though debating a point, "but I don't judge the truth will hurt you none. You've been throwin' your weight around too much. You didn't get into too much trouble while folks knew Old Billy was on the job. But he's gone now and you can't travel on his reputation no more."

Angry color added to the red of Will's face. He said with a touch of his usual arrogance, "I never aimed to coast on the old man's rep. I reckon I can hold my end up same as he did."

"Maybe," Doc Saunders said quietly, "but folks don't know that. Old Billy'd been through the mill and folks knew he was tough. But he never went out lookin' for trouble. If it come his way he could handle it but he kept a check rein on his

temper and a curb on his tongue—which is somethin' you never done."

"Why in hell should I?" Will growled. "I've got the biggest outfit in this section and—"

"And since Old Billy died," Doc Saunders cut in sharply, "you've made an unholy mess of it." He stood up abruptly. "Come on over to the hotel and get a room. You can't get back to the ranch in that shape."

Will stayed in the hotel for two days with compresses on his eyes until the swelling went down. During that time he saw no one save the boy who brought him his meals. Molly tried to see him, but he wouldn't let her in.

By the second night his face was still sore and swollen but he could see. He had left word with the clerk that he wanted to hire some hands but no one had been up to see him. Apparently the word had gone out that Bib M was breaking up and they didn't want a share of its grief.

Doc Saunders had taken his horse to the livery stable for him. Will went down and got it, ignoring the hostler's curious stare.

On the way out of town he saw a light in Sheriff Collins' office and pulled over to it and went in, leaving his horse ground-hitched.

Collins was lolling in an armchair, a smooth-shaven man in his early forties with a bland, expressionless face. From years of public office-holding his senses were acute and attuned to the slightest change in the ever shifting struggle for land and power that went on in the cow country.

Now he took the cigar from his mouth and nodded faintly, a touch of speculation in his light eyes.

Will stalked part way across the room and stopped in front of him. "Collins," he said harshly without preliminary, "Bit-

tern is shovin' stock onto Bib M. I want you to get him off!"

Collins studied his cigar and shook his head. "I've heard about it," he admitted, "but there's nothin' I can do."

A quick anger surged over Will. In other days Collins had jumped with alacrity to do Old Billy's bidding.

"Why the hell can't you?" he demanded truculently. "That's Bib M land."

"You mean Old Billy shoved everybody else off and took it for his own," Collins amended. "As far as I'm concerned that's open range—and I'm not mixin' in a private war."

Will glared at him, seeking to choke down the black anger that threatened to overwhelm him. He swung on his heel and crossed the room. At the door he paused and looked back. "Don't forget," he said thickly, "that Bib M is still the biggest outfit in these parts."

Collins' face remained unchanged but there was a touch of malice in his voice as he said, "Things can change a lot in a few months—maybe you'll talk different the next time I see you."

Will banged the door after him and swung into the saddle. Just outside of town he passed the little house where Joe Frobisher lived. Old Billy Mason had been hard but he had taken care of his own. Now Joe had sufficient money to enable him to sit in the sun for the rest of his life.

Will had a momentary impulse to go in and see him but the manner of Joe's leaving still rankled and he rode past.

On the ride home his thoughts were black. For the first time he fully realized the envy and hatred that smaller men bore a big outfit. He had been vaguely aware of it in Old Billy's time but it had been concealed behind a mask of friendliness. Now that mask had been dropped and he saw the small ranchers grasping out with

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covetous hands for Bib M's lush acres, secure in the knowledge that the old wolf was dead and that Joe Frobisher's steady hand was no longer on the reins.

But the hardest thing for Will to realize was that the vast importance with which he had regarded himself was mostly in his own head. These men regarded him as a hot-tempered fool to be easily brushed aside while they took what they wanted.

He rowelled his horse savagely, afire with impatience to get back and start action against Clyde Bittern. The two blind days he had spent at the hotel had given his anger time to settle down to a hot white flame that continually seared him. When he thought of Clyde, rage blurred his thoughts and he knew only a blind desire to get his hands about the man's throat.



HE WAS up with the first streak of dawn and eating a solitary breakfast when Tim Bradley, his new ramrod, came in. Bradley took one look at Will's face and busied himself building a cigarette.

"Bittern was over yesterday," he announced.

Will stiffened in his chair. "Well?" he demanded.

Bradley lighted up and looked out the window. "Says he's impounded all yore stock that he found on the strip an' it'll cost yuh a dollar a head to get 'em back."

Will sat silent under the shock of the news. So Clyde hadn't been bluffing. He really intended to grab the strip for Circle B. "Anything else?" he asked rigidly.

"Red and Phil got in from the north range last night an' say some of the two-bit outfits is movin' their stuff in from under the ridge onto us," Bradley said grudgingly as though loath to admit it.

Without being told, Will could guess that Bittern had been going around to the small outfits, stirring them up and getting them to crowd in on Bib M. Left alone they would never have dared to encroach.

He stood up leaving his half-finished breakfast. "Round the boys up," he said curtly. "We're ridin' for Circle B!"

Bradley nodded without speaking and left for the corral. Will buckled his gun belt around his lean hips and followed

the new ramrod into the gray morning.

The broncs were going through their usual bucking routine and the big roan gelding the boys had saddled for Will was fiddle footing with excitement when he arrived.

He mounted and the roan buck-jumped across the yard. Will reined him in shortly; this was no time for fooling. The two Pendleton boys and Red and Phil pulled in around him and Tim Bradley and he noted that they all carried saddle guns. A new and strange feeling of humility touched Will. Even when Joe Frobisher and the three other old timers had quit, these boys had stuck. Now they were ready and willing to follow him into trouble.

For the first time Will admitted frankly to himself that he didn't know why. He had played the high handed, arrogant fool ever since Old Billy had died and he acknowledged now that his own evil temper had forced Joe into quitting.

"Let's go!" he said briefly and, with Tim Bradley, led the way out of the yard at a brisk trot.

Three hours of fast riding brought them to an arroyo that cut down from the foothills of the Black Hills. From now on they would be traveling over Circle B range. Later they topped a long swell and looked down at the Circle B buildings. Cattle were feeding in the big corral at the left and a man was moving from the bunkhouse to the cookshack.

Will turned to the Pendleton twins. "You two circle around and come up behind the bunkhouse. I'll give you ten minutes' start."

They nodded and rode off, faces serious. Will rolled a smoke and watched the spread below him. A wisp of smoke was rising from the cookshack chimney and the man had disappeared. The ranch sprawled drowsily in the hot sunlight. He saw the twins come out from behind a clump of cotton woods and ride for the bunkhouse.

"Time to go," he said and led the way down. The Pendleton boys passed from view and Will and the rest of his crew bore down on Circle B with a rush. At the pound of hoofs on the hard packed ground by the corral, a man holding a cup stepped out of the cookshack. He gave a startled

yell and ducked back. When he reappeared he was carrying a hogleg and the cook followed him out with a scatter gun.

The man came over to them and Will saw that he was Ramsey, Clyde Bittern's ramrod. "What yuh after, Mason?" Ramsey asked curtly, his thin sallow face set.

"My stock," Will answered briefly. He turned to Tim. "Get 'em out!"

"It'll cost yuh a dollar a head," Ramsey said and pulled back the hammer with a horny thumb. The cook raised his scatter gun.

"Don't be a fool," Will said shortly. "We're four against two."

"Don't count on that," a voice said from the bunkhouse. Will looked and saw a man standing in the doorway with a rifle. At that instant Luke Pendleton came up behind the man and poked a gun in his back. Harry stepped past him and took the rifle.

"Drop your hardware!" he said crisply.

Ramsey cursed and dropped his gun. The cook swung around and saw Harry and let his scatter gun slide to the ground.

The Pendleton twins herded the three men into the cookshack while the rest of the crew opened the corral gate and started the cattle.

When the herd was out and heading for the Bib M range, Will rode over and stuck his head in the cookshack door. "All right," he told the twins and they came out past him and went to their horses.

"Clyde'll never let yuh get away with this," Ramsey said with bitterness.

"I hope he tries to stop me," Will said wickedly and reined his horse around.

He joined Tim Bradley at point. "Put 'em along," he ordered. "I want to hit our own range before night."

The cattle moiled along in the hot sun, a smothering cloud of dust enveloping them and coating men and horses. Will dropped back to the men riding drag with bannanas pulled up to cover mouth and nose. He sent the Pendleton twins to trail a few hundred yards back and on each side of the herd to where, free of dust, they could spot trouble if any came.

Will toiled in the dust with Phil Ellis and Red Donovan hurrying along the lagers and turning back headstrong steers that wanted to bolt.

The whole thing had come off with far

less trouble than he had expected due to the fact that Bittern hadn't been home. The Circle B owner might still kick up a row but once they got the steers onto Bib M range there wasn't much he could do.

They came to the arroyo and the cattle crossed over its dry, rocky bed. Will felt a sense of relief. He rode up to Tim. "Keep 'em movin'," he said. "You oughta hit Willow Creek by dark. I'm ridin' up the strip a ways to find out what Bittern's up to."

"Watch out you don't stumble onto him," Bradley cautioned. "Right after we pulled out I seen Ramsey high-tail it away from the ranch."

Will nodded and headed up the arroyo. It ran through the middle of a dry, waterless stretch that could only be grazed within a certain radius; for the cattle must turn back to drink. Thus the dry stream bed had come to be the boundary between the two ranches. If Bittern had decided to take over this stretch of range it meant that he would have to go into Bib M territory all the way to Willow Creek—the first water.

Far ahead and to the west he could see the dark slope of a hogback that pushed out from the first low ridges of the Black Hills. Will rode steadily for an hour before he swung away from the arroyo and headed for the hogback.

CHAPTER THREE

"You'll Never Live to Collect"

WILL pulled in the roan just short of the top. The horse was lathered and heaving from the climb and Will tied him to a tree branch and went on up afoot. The top of the hogback was level and tree covered and he had to walk some hundred yards before he could look down the western slope.

He stepped out on a rough outcropping of rock and parted the pine branches before him. Far in the distance lay Willow Creek, the sun glinting redly on its shallow waters. The plain between was dotted with bands of feeding cattle.

"So Red and Phil were right," he muttered.

A wisp of smoke curling up on his left caused him to stare sharply. It floated

up over the trees about halfway down the slope but the growth was too thick for him to see much.

He left the rock and went down slope, traveling warily over the silent carpet of pine needles. From below came the steady sound of an ax hitting into green wood. Will paused, puzzled for a moment, then went swiftly down. The shack came into view with startling abruptness. He stepped around a scrub pine and there it was.

It was built of peeled logs and the man with the ax was cutting roof poles. There was an unglazed window on the end facing Will and through it he could see men moving inside. Bittern had thrown up a line shack!

Will watched for about half an hour while an ugly anger worked within him. Then he retreated carefully back over the ridge to the roan and went down the other side. . . .

Will squatted by Tim Bradley in a fireless camp and munched cold grub. The cattle were strung out along the bank of Willow Creek. "So that's how it is," he finished. "Bittern and his crew are in a line camp this side of the hogback."

Bradley was an indistinct blob of darker blackness in the thin starlight. He finished eating and wiped his hands along the legs of his waist high overalls. "If yuh let Bittern make this grab," he said slowly, "every outfit in the country'll start crowdin' yuh." He paused. "They won't stop till they're standin' in Bib M dooryard."

"You figure it the same way I do," Will said. "I see a way to hit back but it'll mean trouble. . . . I won't go ahead with it unless you and the boys are willin'."

"Trouble or not," Tim said quietly, "yuh can count me in. Let's go talk to the boys."

The waddies sat up in their blankets as the two men approached. They listened in dead silence while Will explained briefly.

He finished and the Pendleton twins looked at each other in the darkness. They both nodded at once as though they could communicate by some system of mental telepathy. "We'll string along, Will," Luke said.

"An' me," Phil Ellis said.

"Why not?" growled Red Donovan. "I've been itchin' for a crack at Circle B."

Will turned to Phil Ellis. "You better fork a horse and light a shuck for town," he told him.

Phil grunted and rolled out of his blankets. A little later they heard the drumming of hoofs as he headed for Powder Flats.

Will stretched out in his blanket. There was an iron, saddle ache in his muscles and back and he had to be up and riding before dawn. . . .

In gray morning light Will Mason picked a tree and bellied down behind it. In front of him and down slope was the cabin and rough pole corral not over a hundred yards away. He filled the magazine of his carbine and settled down to wait. Down on the open plain he knew his crew would be rounding up Circle B cattle by now. *Two could play at the same game*, he thought grimly, and speculated on Bittern's rage when he discovered his cattle were being taken into camp.

Things were coming clearer now as the light strengthened and the shack came into clearer focus.

As he watched, the door opened and a man stepped out. Will levered in a shell and fired. He could see splinters jump from the door jamb. The man ducked and jumped back into the shack. The door slammed and Will put two shots into it and a third through the window.



THE sounds of movement inside the shack came to him and a man's harsh cursing. Lead smacked solidly into the tree before him, followed by the sharp crack of a rifle. He hugged closer to the trunk and put three more shots through the window before he paused to reload.

He sent another shot smacking into the log side of the shack and put the gun down and built a quirley. It gave him a savage amusement to keep Bittern and his men bottled up in the shack.

The door swung part way open and Will picked up his rifle and sent lead winging into it. A shot showered bark and splinters down on him and he saw a rifle barrel protruding from the window. He put two quick shots near it and the rifle disappeared.

The light was good now and far down on the flats he could see the crew rounding up Bittern's cattle. They already had them bunched and were starting the drive back to camp, with Tim Bradley riding point and Red Donovan and the Pendleton boys riding drag on the herd.

Bittern must have seen them too, for his voice came to Will, heavy and thick with anger. "You take them cattle in, Mason," he yelled "and you'll never live to collect on them!"

"You set the price, Clyde," Will called smoothly. "It'll cost you a dollar a head to get 'em back."

Inside the shack Bittern cursed and pumped lead wildly at the tree. Will grinned and moved deeper behind it, not bothering to return the fire.

He saw Red Donovan glance up at the hogback and knew the sound of firing must have carried to him. Red turned back to the herd and started to haze them along at a faster pace.

Time passed; the sun crawled higher and the herd and the crew grew smaller under their enveloping dust cloud.

For some time there had been a sound of hammering coming from the shack and now the door opened and a man edged out holding a plank shield before him. It was wide and tall enough to cover him completely and behind this protection he started for the corral.

Will slammed two shots into it. The man wavered under the impact but kept moving. He gained the corral and went on down to the farther end where it was screened from Will by timber.

Will watched him disappear, then picked up his carbine and shifted up slope through the trees. A hundred feet up he paused and could see into the end of the corral. Bittern had been the man behind the screen and now he was working feverishly to saddle his horse.

Will sighted carefully and squeezed the trigger. Bittern's hat jumped from his head and he turned a startled face in Will's direction. Will levered in another shot and Bittern ducked under his horse's neck and dove between the corral rails into the protecting brush.

Will could still cover the shack so he stayed where he was. One man loose on foot wasn't much menace to his men.

There was silence in the shack now and Will smoked another cigarette and waited. Some time later he caught a glimpse of Bittern working along the slope below the spot where he had first been. The man disappeared among the timber and Will set his eyes on another cleared space and waited. Presently Bittern crossed it, heading up slope now, and it became clear to Will that the rancher was stalking him.

The fact that Bittern would attempt to come up on an armed man in daylight gave Will an insight into the man's grim self-confidence.

When the brush again screened him Will stood up. This part of his job was done. He worked up slope again until he came to a level clearing. He crossed it and stepped behind a tree trunk.

If Bittern continued on his present course he would step into this clearing before many minutes had passed.



WILL'S senses were keyed so high waiting for the man that when Bittern finally paused on the other edge of the clearing it took a second for him to fully realize it. Bittern stood absolutely motionless, his eyes shuttling back and forth for a sight of Will. He took a step forward and Will brought up the rifle.

"Stay where you are, Bittern," he said swiftly, "and drop your gun!"

Bittern's head jerked around in the direction of Will's voice and his face went an angry red. But he was no man to argue when a man had the drop on him. His calculating brain sized up the situation in a split-second—and his gun dropped to the carpet of pine needles.

Will pulled his six-gun and propped his rifle against the tree. He walked over to Bittern and kicked the man's gun into the underbrush, while Bittern watched him warily from hate-filled eyes.

Will tossed his own gun to the other side of the clearing. "Now we'll finish that argument that started in the Bull's Head," he said grimly.

A look of incredulous, savage joy came into Bittern's flat-planed face. He came in at Will, moving with a swift, sure confidence.

Will didn't slap this time; he drove his fist into Bittern's face with his full weight behind it. The shock of the impact ran through his arm clear to the shoulder, filling him with a wild pleasure.

Bittern went down, hitting on his shoulder and rolling over.

"Get up!" Will told him tensely. "I'll give you more of a chance than you gave me."

Bittern pushed himself up on hands and knees and whirled, his blue eyes filled with brilliant hate. He rushed, crouched low, arms working like pistons. Will met that rush in full stride and they slugged with a savage intensity, pine needles showering out from under their shifting feet.

The pain of Bittern's knuckles against Will's still bruised and cut face was a bitter stimulus that aroused a wild, primitive lust within him. The clearing was filled with the smash and crack of blows and heavy, labored breathing.

Will was knocked off his feet and he rolled in time to avoid Bittern's swinging boot but the spur cut a gash across his shoulder.

He came up, swinging powerfully, and hammered Bittern across the clearing by sheer weight of blows.

Bittern's face was cut about the eyes and blood ran from his smashed nose but he fought back with stark implacability. He came in close and brought up his knee sharply. Will doubled over with the pain and stumbled forward wrapping his arms about Bittern's body. He heaved and the Circle B rancher left his feet and hit the ground.

Will stepped back, sucking great, shaky breaths into his lungs. Sweat plastered his shirt to him, his face was streaked with blood and grime but the glint in his gray eyes was strangely akin to Old Billy's when the going was tough.

Bittern hauled himself to his feet and lunged in but he had lost the fast beat of the fight. He fought now, doggedly, with head and hands but the heart was knocked out of him. And Will, the flame still strong within, battered him with great swinging blows that pulled at the very roots of his endurance.

Bittern's confidence was gone and a dazed, hunted look came into his eyes. Over the turbulent flow of the fight, Will

caught the crackle of underbrush down slope. He heaved himself at Bittern and sledged him with both iron-hand fists. Clyde's knees buckled and he fell forward on his face in the pine needles, to lie without motion.

Will forced himself across the clearing to his gun. He scooped it up and stumbled for his rifle as the voices of Bittern's crew came to him. They were coming up fast and he could hear Ramsey's nasal voice calling to his boss.

Will picked up the carbine and blundered through the timber, the air wheezing and whistling in his throat. He had fought to almost the limit of endurance and this forced climb to the brow of the hogback drained his energy to the last drop. A scattering of voices behind him told when the crew discovered Bittern.

That was bound to delay them somewhat and Will fought his way to the top with blood pounding in his ears and a black veil dimming the timber so that he blundered into trees.

At the top he fought down a sickness and forced himself across the level. He went down the slope on the other side with the sound of crackling brush behind him, his knees unsteady.

The roan was eyeing him, ears pricked forward and Will loosened the tie rope and dragged himself into the saddle. The roan started down hill and Will sagged forward, hands wrapped around the horn, content to let him pick his own trail.

In back of him the sounds grew fainter, finally dying away.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hot Lead at Bib M

IT WAS about nine in the morning when Clyde Bittern stepped from the saddle in front of the land commissioner's office. He was battered and sore from his beating and his face was cut and lopsided with bruises. His flattened nose would never be the same again but the main damage had been done inside him. Bittern's scheming, vengeful temper would ride him relentlessly until the man responsible had been brought down.

His plans had gone wrong mainly because Will Mason had proven unexpected-

ly tough and resourceful. Already the pattern of fresh plans had taken shape in his mind and they included Sheriff Collins. For Bittern knew now that he was going to kill Will Mason and he wanted some semblance of justification for doing it.

Collins, although he leaned to Bittern's side of the fence, had steadfastly refused to be drawn into a fight over unpatented range. Bittern thought he knew how to get around that. He went into the land commissioner's office and crossed the mud-died floor to a big, map-covered table.

The clerk got up from a small desk and came over to him. His eyes went in startled query to Bittern's face but the Circle B owner's forbidding stare discouraged questions.

"You got a map of where my place joins Bib M?" Bittern asked bluntly.

The clerk nodded and sorted a map from the pile. He laid it out and Bittern pointed to the site where he had put up the line camp. "I want to homestead that piece," he said.

"Can't do it," the clerk told him. "A fella by the name of Phil Ellis was in yesterday and filed on it."

Bittern stared at the man while a dark purple tide welled up in his face. He balled the map in his fist and flung it on the floor. Then he stamped out, heedless of the clerk's protestations.

He paused outside on the plank walk fighting down his anger so that he could think. He swung onto his horse and went down the road to the Bull's Head where he had left his ramrod, Ramsey.

He went in and stood beside the sallow-faced man at the bar. "Mason beat me to it," he told Ramsey grudgingly. "Had one of his men file it yesterday."

One-Eyed Casey lifted his bull neck and shoulders from beneath the bar. "I reckon that ain't all he done," he grinned, his good eye on Bittern's smashed nose.

Bittern's face flamed wrathfully. "It's the last he'll do!" he raged. "He's got some of my cattle and I aim to hunt him out of his hole."

His eyes fell on the Swayze brothers at the other end of the bar and he stalked over to them, Ramsey trailing. They were owners of one of the two-bit spreads that bordered Bib M and they regarded Bittern with a certain amount of respect.

"You two been sayin' how you'd like to have some Bib M grass," Bittern said shortly. "Here's your chance. I aim to crack down on Mason. Get some of your neighbors and be at my place by four in the mornin'."

The lanky Swayze brothers looked at each other doubtfully. "We might get into law trouble if we done that," Lem, the older one, said.

"Hell," Bittern blustered, "he's got my cattle and I got a right to get 'em back, ain't I? You can ride with me. He's only got five hands on the place."

Lem Swayze nodded speculatively, a buried greed shining in his eyes. "I reckon we couldn't get into no trouble thataway," he agreed.

"Course you can't," Bittern reassured him. "You be there at four sharp."

When he left the Bull's Head, One-Eyed Casey was again bent over the wash sink and the tinkle of glasses sounded through the room. . . .

Will Mason saw the last of the Circle B cattle driven into the horse pasture and gave a sigh of relief. He had circled far out after his fight with Bittern in order to pull them away from the confiscated herd in case they followed him. They hadn't as far as he could discover, but it had been night when he rejoined his outfit. He had slept uneasily for the few hours before dawn and had risen to finish the drive.

Now the last head of stock was in and the gate swung shut behind them. Will was bone tired. There was an ache in his muscles and he was too weary to eat supper.

"Tell the cook I won't eat," he said to Tim Bradley and headed for the house. He took time out to wash up at the pump but the minute his head touched the pillow he was asleep.



SOME time toward morning he dreamed that Bittern and his crew were chasing him, shooting at him with rifles. He came awake with a start and was shaking his head to clear it and grinning at his dream when the sharp crack of a rifle drifted in from the open flats to the north.

Will swung his legs over the bunk and reached for his boots in one motion. By the time he had stamped into them he heard the drumming of a horse running full tilt for the ranch.

Will scooped up his cartridge belt and bolted for the corral; Phil Ellis was doing the job of night wrangler and he wouldn't be coming in at that speed unless he had run into trouble.

Will reached the bunkhouse as the horse pounded around the end of the corral and slid to a stop. In the gray light Will could see Phil bent forward over the horse's neck.

Phil saw him and gasped out shakily, "Bittern and his crew! Looks like he's got the Swayze boys and some of the rim ranchers with him—" He sagged out of the saddle.

Will caught him. The hand on Phil's shoulder encountered slippery wetness. The crescendo of running horses came to Will then and he kicked open the door and carried Phil in.

His voice boomed through the room. "Wake up, you rannies! Bittern and his crew are payin' us a visit!"

The bunkhouse came alive as the crew hit the floor, stamping into boots and grabbing gun belts and rifles. Will laid Phil on a bunk and ripped away the bloody shirt. Phil's face was a chalky gray and a black hole gaped just under his left collar bone.

A stern, bitter anger glowed in Will's brain; Bittern would murder to gain his ends! He ripped off a strip of blanket and bound it over the wound. It was all he could do—all he had time for. The rest of the crew scattered to vantage points and the sharp crack of rifles was mixed with the blunter roar of sixguns.

Will crossed to the front window. Men and horses were sifting through the morning's grayness and gunfire flashed murkily. Harry Pendleton was at a side window, his rifle banging spasmodically but the rest of the crew was gone.

Rifle flashes from the cookshack told Will where two of them were and a boom from the log stable accounted for the third. Will raised his rifle but the horsemen were already cutting out of sight around the stable.

Bittern led them, raging. Things were

going all wrong but he was in too deep now to pull out. If only that damned horse wrangler hadn't got away! He had counted on coming up while Bib M was still asleep. That way, it would have been easy. Now there was hell to pay. He rammed his horse over beside Ramsey and the Swayze brothers. "We'll have to drive 'em out, building by building," he said harshly. "We'll plaster the stable with lead and you two fellas go in by the back."

Clem Swayze shook his head in sudden alarm. "Not me," he declared. "I ain't shovin' my nose in there to have it shot off."

"Yah," Ramsey said bitterly. "Yuh ain't got the guts of a coyote. Me an' one of the crew'll do the job."

He called one of the Circle B hands and, as a hail of lead smacked into the log stable, the two dismounted and ran for the back.

The sudden lull in the shooting worried Will. "Stay here with Phil," he told Harry. He eased out the door and headed for the stable. Half-way there a wild racket of gunfire broke out on the other side of it. Gun in hand, Will ran joltingly for the back. He swung around the corner—and almost into the arms of two men running in from the other side.

Will shot, his gun almost touching Ramsey's stomach and the Circle B ramrod doubled over and dropped as though kicked by a mule. Will ducked and fired again as the hot blast of a .45 tore at him, stinging his cheek and blinding him with its hot gases.

He went to his knees, dazed by the shock, rubbing his eyes to clear them. In a blur he saw the other man raising his gun as he swayed on his feet. Will shoved his hogleg straight out before him and triggered. The man went backward and fell, his arms spread wide.

Will heard feet running in back of him and the voice of Tim Bradley shouting, "Will! Will!"

A confused jumble of hoofs sounded as Circle B and the rim ranchers came pouring around to the back. Hands grabbed Will and hauled him around the corner of the building and then Tim Bradley and Luke Pendleton went into action, their guns blasting and their horses charging

into that mob of men and horses.



BITTERN was cursing like a mad-man driving his big black straight for them, the rest of his men boiling around him. Will braced himself on the corner logs and raised his gun. He triggered—and the hammer clicked futilely.

But Bittern never had a chance to follow up his advantage. A rifle cracked off to the right and the Circle B owner rolled out of the saddle to land heavily. More guns flashed and the startled Circle B men wheeled to meet them.

The Swayze boys were already high-tailing it for the tall timber, their quirts working faster than their horse's feet, and the rest of the rim crowd was following. With Bittern and Ramsey both down, the fight went out of the crew and they wheeled and raced after the others.

Will holstered his gun and took a long breath as the four men rode up and dismounted. "Joe!" he ejaculated.

"I reckon it is," Frobisher said with a grin. "One-Eyed Casey come over 'bout four o'clock an' told me what was goin' to happen—said he couldn't sleep fer thinkin' 'bout it."

"Casey's all wool and a yard wide," Will murmured fervently, "but I wonder why he did it?"

"I asked him," Frobisher replied. "Casey said he didn't wanta lose a steady customer."

Will looked at Frobisher and the three old-timers who had quit and a sudden wave of humility came over him. He hadn't done anything to deserve their help. "Joe," he said humbly, "I've been a locoed idiot." He turned around and bent over. "Who wants the first shot?"

Frobisher laughed. "From the looks of yore face," he said, "I reckon yuh've had 'bout enough poundin'."

Will straightened up and Frobisher went on in his dry, quiet tone. "Look at yuh. Grimy an' bloody an' yore face all pounded outa shape. Yuh've bin raisin' hell all over the place an' now yuh jest fit off Circle B an' the rim bunch. . . . I reckon," he concluded, "yo're jest 'bout what Old Billy prayed yuh'd be."

They carried the bodies of Ramsey, Bittern and the cowhand into the bunkhouse. Phil's shoulder had stopped bleeding and Frobisher allowed he'd come around all right.

Will turned to him, "Will you take your old job, Joe?" he asked.

Joe Frobisher shook his head and smiled. "I reckon not. Them three old-timers will come back but I got other plans. I jest bought me a business."

"Business?" Will echoed. "Where?"

"Right in Powder Flats," Joe said in a pleased voice. "I'm takin' over Molly Breen's restaurant."

"Molly's place!" Will said startled. "Is she leavin' town?"

"Yep," Joe replied.

Will laid an urgent hand on Joe's arm. "Stay here and keep an eye on things for a while, Joe," he pleaded. "I've got pressin' business in town."

Molly Breen was on the porch of Ma Callahan's boarding house when Will reined in the heaving roan and stumbled up the steps. She came to him, eyes wide, and Will took her by the shoulders. "Molly," he said urgently, "you can't leave—you—"

The look in Molly's eyes stopped him. Minutes later he asked, "Where were you goin'?"

"I wasn't going anywhere," Molly said in surprise. "I was waiting for you. . . . Joe Frobisher said you would be along."

Will swore softly over Molly's head. "Damn that Joe Frobisher. . . . He's always one jump ahead of me."

But his lips were grinning when they came down on Molly's.

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HEADIN' FOR HADES!



By **JOE AUSTELL SMALL**

Deputy Dave Malden could no more afford to crawfish before the Bull Nettle's vociferous gun-threats than he could afford to dispose of the reckless Yegua kid by either hot lead—or iron bars!

DAVE MALDEN sat up in his bunk, stiffened suddenly as his skin bumped out like a shriveled lemon. Flea Hotel, his old lop-eared potlicker, growled once—low. The dog must have slunk under the house. There he whined uneasily and beat the cross rails intermittently with a stubby tail.

Instantly Dave Malden was wide awake

and on guard. He slid off the bed slowly, placed a bare foot on the rough floor and released his weight from the squeaky springs by degrees. The rusty coiled wire popped slightly as it expanded gradually. The young rancher let out a thankful sigh when finally he stood crouched in the tiny bedroom.

Crossing the room carefully so that the split oak flooring boards wouldn't squeak, Dave Malden reached for his belt and gun. They hung from a pair of mounted horns. The young rancher made a mental note as he buckled the cracked leather strip around his hips. The way things were shaping up of late, he'd better sleep with that worn-handled Peacemaker within arm's reach.

Dave Malden looked like a bilious ghost as he slithered silently through the dark house. He let himself out a screen door at a point where his oak log house made a sharp angle in its four-room L. He'd meant to put some split willow steps there, but he just hadn't got around to it yet. Tonight Dave Malden was glad he hadn't. A prowler, circling the house for a vantage point, would never take the screen door, without porch nor steps, to be an outlet. It looked like a blind door, placed there for ventilation.

Dave Malden bent low, crossed the back yard to the young pear tree. He surveyed that section of the front yard which he could see from this point. Then he worked around to the tiny pole smokehouse, aiming to circle the haystacks and work out front in a wide circle. This way he might be able to flank the prowler and beat him at his own game.

The potlicker hound had worked up enough courage to growl occasionally and patch up his fear with a few short barks.

"Claw the rafters, lawdog!" a cold, hard voice came from behind. "You ought to know that a man with killin' on his mind always 'proaches from the back! You can drop that gun now."

Dave Malden opened his right fist. His old Peacemaker struck the ground with a dull thud.

"I'm gonna kill yuh now." The voice was young, grimly intent. The old hound was approaching cautiously now, puffing out his jowls in slow growls that ended in combustible barks.

Dave Malden turned slowly. He looked into the eyes of a young fellow with a spotted blue handkerchief over his face. The man's eyes shone out clearly in the yellow moonlight. They were steel blue, hard. When the eyelids closed, they batted twice quickly. Dave saw the man start then, look at him intently, and the big orbs grew wider. Suddenly, the gunman turned and ran, ran hell-bent into the peach orchard and on through the thin spray of scrub oak toward the branch.

For a long moment Dave Malden stood there watching the dull moonlight gradually etch out the sharp outline of the retreating gunman. His lower jaw sagged. His hands remained above his head. The young deputy felt like a drowning man reaching for a straw and grasping a sturdy log instead.

Dave Malden dropped his hands then as his presence of mind reeled back, dived for the old Peacemaker lying at his feet, and sent a hasty shot at a splotch of dark gray blur among the scrub oaks. His bullet whined off a spindly sapling and ricocheted harmlessly into the night air.

"Well, I'll be consarned!" Dave Malden said unbelievably, hardly moving his lips. "I'll be consarned and mighty-damned!"



THIRTY minutes later the young rancher sat on the foot of his bed and plucked listlessly at the peeling skin on his red nose. His complexion was so fair it wouldn't hold a tan. It made his face look constantly red and ragged. But his jaws were full and tapered gradually. His chin was broad. Red hair that curved and circled at will over his head refused to stay back.

The brittle blue eyes, quick and eager and full of dry good humor, gave Dave Malden his personality. The boys liked Dave Malden's dry humor and gentle ribbing. He'd do to gurgle the jug with.

Dave Malden's mind was mulling back over the startling occurrence that had roused him from deep slumber. He couldn't make heads or tails of the whole thing. He was a part-time deputy sheriff. Could it be that someone had aimed to take his grudge out on lawmen in general, then weakened at the last moment?

"I guess," Dave Malden mumbled with a sigh, "if a man lives long enough he's apt to meet up with a heap o' crazy damned things."

Dave reached for his boots then. There was a dull glow on the eastern horizon. Today was the time he'd set aside for hauling salt to the licks in three pastures.

Dave Malden's Gila Lizard Spread wasn't a big ranch. It wasn't even a big small ranch. But it was five hundred acres of the neatest grazing land in Central Texas. Now-and-Then Creek, with its springs of cold water boiling up out of the ground, centered his little spread and furnished unlimited water supply. This far down, the creek ran constantly. Farther up it was dry, running only now and then when the ground was wet and the seeps were active.

Dave had built the four-room, log-house himself. It looked puny, of course, up alongside Mike Akley's Ox Shank Ranch buildings, or compared with Sam Stroble's huge Bull Nettle layout. But it was his. He'd built it himself, every lick of it.

The barns, the corrals, the fences—he'd built them all. He'd dug an irrigation ditch from the Blue Cat Hole to the little patch. It made a garden spot that knew how to handle seed.

Sure, it had calloused his hands, peeled his face constantly, slowed his sprightly gait some, maybe—but it was a neat little layout.

He was ready to bring in June Warner now. The place needed a lighter touch inside and around the yard.

Every stroke Dave Malden had taken during the past twelve months was motivated by a dark-haired girl that was life itself wrapped up in one small package. It made a feeling like prickly heat course over Dave Malden's body just to look at her.

He'd dug that irrigation ditch to the garden with her in mind. He could see her fitting about caring for the tomatoes, the black-eyed peas, maybe planting some four o'clock flowers in the corners. He could hear June Warner's clear laughter echoing between the neat walls of the four rooms he'd built so painstakingly. It'd made the whole job seem easier, thinking of her like that.

And now that he had everything ready

for the girl to move in, a fellow they called Yegua Jackson had started polishing the back gallery steps of old Dad Warner's home with the seat of his pants.

Maybe, Dave Malden thought bitterly, *I've done too much building and plannin' and not enough actual sparkin'!* He'd heard of stranger things happening.

Dave hadn't met Yegua Jackson, but he'd heard about the kid. Yegua hadn't been in the country long. But already he was known as a gun-swift youngster with sand in his craw. Folks said he could shade any man in Bronson County to the draw. In Dave Malden's eyes the boy was a gunman. He wasn't the kind of a man for a girl like June Warner.



THREE days later an Ox Shank puncher pulled a sweating roan up short in front of Dave Malden's little ranch-house and called out sharply.

The young rancher opened the door and invited: "Git down and come in!"

"Haven't got time, Dave," the puncher said. "Mike sent me over to git you. There's been a shootin'. That damned Yegua Jackson's killed Sump Watson!"

Dave Malden didn't hesitate. He piled his dirty dinner dishes in a pan to soak, swung leather on his silver gelding, and rode.

The Ox Shank puncher was noncommittal. "Mike told me not to run off at the mouth," he said by way of defense. "Other side claims it was defense. We thought you better look into it."

Dave Malden had expected trouble. Sam Stroble hadn't imported the gunman merely to kill off the rattlesnakes on his ranch. Dave Malden figured that the old feud between the two big ranches had started boiling again and pretty soon would be rattling the kettle top.

The sheriff of Bronson County had made Dave Malden part-time deputy mainly in order to have someone who could serve papers on the Ox Shank and the Bull Nettle spreads. The two big ranches were constantly in trouble. It was either Mike Akley slapping a lawsuit on Sam Stroble over some trivial occurrence, or it was the Bull Nettle turning the tide with a bellyache of his own.

From this remote corner of Bronson County, it was forty-seven miles to the county seat. The sheriff had figured it cheaper in the long run to appoint Dave Malden part-time deputy than be forced to ride out himself each time one of the big ranch owners put in a complaint. And those service fees had come in mighty handy during the early months of Dave Malden's struggle at making a go of ranching.

A little one-horse rail siding quit the main line and came sneaking back through the hills, twisting and curving like it didn't know where it was going and was afraid to go there if it found out. They called it the Now-and-Then Creek Siding. It finally stopped at old Dad Warner's General Store on the creek bank. There were loading pens here too. It was a forsaken, desolate country, the dividing line between two feuding ranches. It was where the Ox Shank cowboys and the Bull Nettle punchers did their shooting when they had some shooting to do.

Dave Malden could smell trouble in the air while he was yet a half-mile away from the siding store. A group of punchers lolled around on the shady porch and under the big cottonwood. Another group lazed against the corral fences a hundred yards away and on the creek bank. The scene shaped up in Dave Malden's mind as that of an animated powder barrel looking around for a good live spark of fire to pick a fight with.

It was the Bull Nettle outfit there at the store. The young ranch-deputy greeted the boys solemnly, dismounted, and dropped his reins across the tie rail. A lanky puncher jerked his head toward the open door. Deputy Dave Malden stepped inside.

"Howdy, Dave!" Sam Stroble called from the tiny bar. The Bull Nettle ramrod was big, bluff and beefy. "Come over and have a drink!"

"Not right now," the deputy declined. "Got a little work to do first."

"Guess it's about the killin'. I told Mike it warn't no use to send for you. Pure case of self-defense. Mike won't say it was nothin' else hisself. One o' his punchers got a little drunk here last night. Got up a difference with Yegua Jackson, one of my boys. The Ox Shank hand went

for his gun and Yegua shaded him to the draw. 'At's all it war to hit. Ask anybody!"

◆ ◆ ◆

DAVE MALDEN strolled back out on the porch. "You fellers could hear Sam's story from here. Anybody want to spill another version of the shootin'?"

None did.

Then Dave walked down to the loading pens. The Ox Shank boys were shooting craps, lolling in the shade of a post oak clump and tilting a bottle occasionally.

"You send for me, Mike?" the deputy asked.

Mike Akley, the Ox Shank owner, slouched against a stooped blackjack and whittled half-heartedly at a rough-barked knot. "Yeah, Dave, I did." Akley was a lanky individual with a stringy tobacco-stained mustache. "That Bull Nettle gun-coyote shot Sump Watson last night. Sump was a little drunk all right, Dad tells me. Even went for his gun first, I think. Just thought you ought to look the thing over so there wouldn't be no misunderstanding in the future about it."

Things were too quiet. Dave Malden walked back to the store and talked to Dad Warner then. He heard the same story. Dad was calm and collected. He wouldn't side in with either group.

Tension was tight at the siding, so tight it seemed to hum. All hell would pop loose between the two outfits at the drop of a hat. There were at least forty men at the siding now. It would be a pitched battle like the one that started this feud nine years ago.

Sam Stroble was still standing at the tiny bar. He was holding a whiskey glass in his right hand and staring vacantly at the wet circle it left on the bar. The circle seemed to fascinate him.

"Where is this Yegua Jackson kid, Sam?" Dave Malden asked. He had checked up on all other angles before talking to the man involved. It seemed always to work out better for him that way.

"He just this minute rode in from the ranch, Dave," the big man said. "That's him sittin' at that poker table over in the corner. The one with his back to us."

Dave Malden nodded his thanks. "Sam, after I talk with Yegua, take your boys and shove the Siding behind you. It might save another ruckus."

"Aw, Dave!" the big man protested goodnaturedly. "I got a jag o' long yearlings on the way up to be loaded. Me an' my boys are just waitin' around for them to get here."

"It don't take twenty men to load on a jag o' yearlings, does it, Sam?"

"These here are damned wild yearlings though, Dave." The big man smiled. "Damn wild!"

Dave shrugged his shoulders. He walked over to the poker table in the corner. "You Yegua Jackson?" he addressed the man facing away from him.

"That's what they call me," the young fellow spoke slowly, rising. He faced the deputy then, smiling sheepishly.

Dave Malden's under jaw dropped. He jerked back as if someone had shoved the blade of a knife at his stomach. The deputy's lips wiggled slightly but no words came out. When his voice finally located itself he said softly simply:

"I'll be teetotally damned! What on earth are you doing here, Bud?"

"Sort of got a job, I guess."

Dave looked at his brother closely. His quick shock and the following surge of gladness at seeing the kid brother after so long gave way gradually to a feeling of concern.

"You've sure 'nuf changed a heap. Grown up." Dave Malden watched his brother's face closely then. "Guess that's one reason I didn't recognize you the other night. I ought to a'recognized that double-eye-blink of yours anywhere though!"



THEY had walked away from the poker table slowly, were now in a corner of the store where no one could overhear their conversation.

"I was just goin' to scare you, Dave," the boy spoke earnestly. "I didn't know who you were. They didn't even tell me your name. Sam just said there was a deputy livin' in the oxbow swing of Now-and-Then Creek and for me to slip over and give him a scarin' up. They're tryin'

to get you to hand in your badge as deputy. Sam 'specially don't like the law messin' around over his private little feud with Mike Akley. Didn't even know you was in this part of the state, Dave. When I saw who it was, I got so flabbergasted and ashamed of myself at the same time that I tucked tail and run like hell! But I didn't aim to kill no one, Dave—even if it hadn't been you. I was just going to scare you up."

"Looks like you scared Sump Watson pretty bad." Dave spoke with a certain hardness in his voice.

"But that's different, Dave!" the boy said quickly. "That was self-defense. Ask anyone that saw it."

"Why'd you change your name, Bud?" "Afraid Ma or Pa'd get holt of news about some of my doin's. You know they grieved a heap over you back in the days when you could shade the devil and give him a hand-on-the-handle head start."

"Yeah, that's one reason I quit. The other reason was that it just don't work out in the long run, Bud. It's a rotten business. It's great to make twice as much money as the boys that sweat for their wages. Makes you feel pretty big to know everybody's scared of you. But it's rotten. And some day a man'll come along that's just a little faster. . . ."

"Yuh taught me to be almighty quick on the draw, Dave," the younger Malden reminded.

"Yeah, dammit, I know! That was back in the days when I saw glory in bein' a gunman. But I found out. I know, Bud. Take my word for it. Remember back now—did you ever see a crack gunman with a beard?"

"Can't say that I have. Why?"

"They don't live long enough to grow one, that's why!" Dave Malden was talking earnestly now. There was a note of near pleading in his voice. "There's gun glory for the man that kills a gunman. You're just like a prize buck, Bud—everybody wants to mount your horns. You feel confident, of course. They all do. They get to thinkin' that the bullet was never made that could kill them. But they find out different. Quit the game, kid, before it's too late. Settle down. Make something outta yourself."

"You quit," the young Malden said

slowly. "Where did it get you, Dave?"

"It got me an iron of my own, five hundred acres of top range land—a home, Bud. That means something."

"It's a nice little place," agreed the youngster. "But you must have worked like a dog, Dave."

"Look, Bud." Dave was getting a little desperate. "My place is getting too big for me to handle. Move in with me. I'll sign over a half interest to you; let you pay it out slow and easy. Ma and Pa'd be proud to have us together like that."

"That's sure fine of you to make the offer, Dave. But this is my game. I'm just not cut out for range work. Maybe in three-four years I'll buy you out and retire."

That last quip hurt. Dave Malden sighed. "O. K. Bud, if that's the way you feel about it. But it's dirty work. Go ahead and kid yourself about self-defense and fairness. You know better. You knew down in your heart, Bud, that you could shade Sump Watson to the draw. You goaded him a little maybe. You knew how the cards were stacked. Pretty soon you'll get to where you don't exactly care whether a man draws first or not. You'll just kill. I ain't arrestin' you on this charge. It's not because you're my brother, but because the law don't bother a man in this country that draws second."

"My lettin' you alone will just add a little more wood to the fire. Sam Stroble'll think he can get by with anything now since his head gunman has a deputy sheriff for a brother. Sam'll goad you on, make you do more of his dirty work. Then when you get your tail in a crack,

he'll let you stretch. You're heading hellward, Bud—fast."

"I got friends, Dave." The younger Malden was slightly resentful. "They won't let me down. I even got a lady friend. I didn't find out that she was your gal until after that night at your ranch."

Dave Malden's face colored slowly. "I hope your friends stick, Bud," he said and his voice was cool. The deputy ignored his brother's statement about the girl. "You'll need all the friends you can rake up if you keep workin' for Sam Stroble!" He turned on a boot heel and walked out of the store.



AN OUTSIDER wouldn't have taken Sam Stroble and Mike Akley to be enemies. They even smiled when they talked to each other. But that smile was like the pleasant-sounding gurgle of nitro-glycerin being poured from a bottle.

Dave Malden talked to Sam Stroble then. He told him that as far as he was concerned, the case was closed. He ordered Sam to clear his boys out of the Siding. The Bull Nettle owner looked smug. A mustached upper lip pulled back across tobacco-stained teeth slowly in a victory smile.

"I thought you'd see it that way, Dave!" he said. The big man's loose-roeled spurs jangled dully as he walked away from the bar to bark out an order of retreat to his boys.

Dave Malden walked down to the loading pens then. Three more Ox Shank

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boys had just ridden in. The acrid smell of caliche dust stood heavy in the languid air. Dave Malden told old Mike Akley the same thing he'd told Sam Stroble. Old Mike looked at him for a long moment. His mealy old eyes were endeavouring to hide a dull glow.

"At's 'bout all you could a'done the way she laid, Dave," he said. Then the old cattleman ordered his boys to hit leather.

Dave Malden sighed thankfully as he watched the two big outfits ride away from the Siding in opposite directions. It was hard to believe. Old Mike Akley had given in too easily, and hadn't ridden out with his boys. Neither had Sam Stroble.

Dave Malden gave one last look at the two dust clouds and stepped inside the store. It was empty now save for Dad Warner. He talked to Dad awhile, then leisurely looked over the grocery stock, deliberately killing time.

It was getting late. Dave Malden bought some groceries finally and was about to step outside when Mike Akley's voice brought out cold bumps on his skin.

"Give me a chance, man! Holster your gun and we'll—"

That's when the bullet got Mike Akley.

Dave Malden dropped the sack of groceries. He raced through the door, across the rotting porch, around the south corner of the little siding store. A man stood near the fallen Ox Shank owner. Mike Akley's gun had never been drawn. He hadn't had a chance. The old rancher was kicking a booted right foot feebly. Mike Akley was dying.

Yegua Jackson made his play now. To Dave Malden it looked like the gunman had just holstered his gun, was about to bolt from the scene of murder. He'd been caught red-handed. The light was yellow-brown. Yegua Jackson couldn't see who the man was there before him, but he didn't hesitate. His hand flashed downward.

Speed of the two draws was so nearly even that both guns blazed. But the thin yellow stab of flame from Dave Malden's gun had already faded when Yegua Jackson's iron barked. That's why the younger gunman's aim was bad. A bullet from the deputy's gun had raked his hand, left a

gash of cut muscle, bleeding veins. Yegua Jackson's bullet thudded dully into Dave Malden's right arm, a good foot from its intended mark.

"Dave!" The boy's voice was a gasp. The heavy gun slid from his nerveless right hand.

"Looks like you're in a tight spot this time, Bud." Dave's voice was cold.

"Guess I'll have to take you in!"

"It'll mean hangin', Dave!" There was fear in the kid's face. "I didn't do it!"

"Let me see your gun."

"There was already one empty shell in it. I'd shot at a—"

"Weak story, Bud," Dave cut in. "It'll never hold!"

Fear brightened the eyes of Yegua Jackson. White splotches dotted his face. His voice was high pitched.

"You could let me go, Dave!" He was getting desperate now. "I'm your own brother. You could say whoever shot him got away. No one's come outta the store. Ain't nobody in it but Dad Warner and he won't come out. He ain't takin' sides. It'd be so easy. It'd save Ma and Pa a heap o' grief. Turn your back. In five seconds I can be out of sight. I'll leave for good. You can say you saw nobody run away!" There was a tone of desperate pleading in the boy's voice now. He was scared.

"I gave you plenty of talk, plenty of warnin', Bud," Dave's voice was resigned, heavy with feeling. "I hate like hell to do it but you had it comin' and then some. If I'd let you off this time, you'd go on worse'n ever."

"You mean, you mean, Dave—you're gonna let 'em hang your own brother—"

"Sure he'd let 'em hang yuh, son!"



DAVE MALDEN felt the muzzle of a gun gouge his backbone. "Drop it and grab air, lawdog!" Sam Stroble's whisky-heavy voice commanded. The gun slid slowly from Dave's hand. The cattleman backed away two steps.

"Tell him, Sam!" Yegua Jackson said eagerly. "Tell my brother that I didn't kill Mike Akley in cold blood!"

"Aw, now, don't act that way, Yegua."

The big man smiled. There was a patronizing tone to his voice. "You was talkin' to Mike like I told you to. I was around the corner of the store there. Now you don't think I'd a shot Mike and made it look like you did it, do you Yegua?"

"Yeah, I think you would." The kid was looking at Sam Stroble like he'd never seen the man before.

"Well, you better get your thinkin' worked out better from now on. I'm yore friend, remember. This kind-hearted brother of your'n is bent on stretchin' your neck. Get goin' now, kid. Leave the country. This hangin'-crazed deputy here'll have a little accident purty quick maybe and you'll be scot free. With him out of the way, they won't know who done these willin's!" Sam Stroble's laugh was thick, mirthless. "If you'd ducked out of here quick while ago when I said to, quit the country then, maybe th' deputy here would a' got by. But you stood here paralyzed like a damned dummy! I had to circle the store and throw down on the law from behind."

Yegua Jackson's eyes were stone gray now, brittle hard. His lips were tight.

The kid was getting a hold on himself.

"Yeah. Me runnin' away would rub all guilt off'n my hide, eh, Sam?" His voice was strained. "Like hell it would! It'd throw the blame on me! You'd get by with two killin's and sic the law hounds on me. I ain't a plumb idiot, Sam!"

"So you don't 'preciate what I'm doin' for you, eh, Yegua?"

The heavy gun swung away from Dave Malden in a slow arc. It came to rest on the mid-section of Yegua Jackson's belly.

"Maybe we could have two little accidents here 'stead o' one." A new light widened the swaying cowman's eyes. "You shot Mike Akley. Dave ran out and caught you red-handed. You swung on him to save yore neck from a hang-noose. You two shot it out. Both are top-notch gunmen. It wouldn't look strange at'all if the two of you got killed. Why, that's a damned good story! Think I'll—" Sam Stroble jerked his gun back at the deputy in a vicious arc.

Dave Malden had dived suddenly, jerked to the side. The move cost him a bullet across the ribs. It broke through the bone, tearing and ripping as it went.



The gun roared lead and flame.

Dave Malden staggered back, clutched at his side, bumped against the store as he sank slowly.

Yegua Jackson had jerked alive at the first move his brother made. He dived for his dropped gun, scooped it up with a nervous left hand. His finger squeezed trigger while the weapon was still sweeping upward through the air. The orange flame stabbed out at Sam Stroble a sliced second before the big man could swing his heavy weapon back on his hired gunman. Spinning lead spanged into the heavy belly of the startled cattleman. It was like a man hitting a fat ham with the palm of his hand.

Sam Stroble dropped his gun as if it burned his hand. He lost all interest in his attempt to murder. Fat hands clutched at a little black hole in his belly. Concern, quick fear crowded the kill gleam from his eyes. He began to beg the gunman for mercy. He tried to walk around the store then, to the front door. He was like a doddering old man, shaking with hot ague, trying to walk across a log-strewn ground. Sam Stroble stumbled, teethered weakly and fell on his face in the dirt.

Dave Malden sat with his back braced against the store. The shocked numbness was gradually leaving his left side. Yegua Jackson looked at him and smiled.

"Just handed in my resignation to the boss," he said. "You hurt bad?"

"I'll patch up," Dave answered. "How's the gun-slingin' Yegua Jackson?"

"He got kilt," the boy said slowly, dropped his head slightly. "Died back there a few minutes ago when he seen how a gunman's friends stick in a tight. My own name's Tom Malden. I'm pleased to meet'cha!"

"I'm damned glad to make your acquaintance too, Bud!" The deputy smiled. "You hurt much?"

"Just the paw." The boy raised his right hand and looked at it with seeming light interest. "It'll stitch back. Always be stiff though. Won't be a gunman's hand. But it wouldn't a'been anyhow. I got my dose all in one big spoonful tonight. I got rattled and scared when you run up on me here. Didn't know who it was, but I aimed to kill to save my own hide. Nearly plugged my brother. When I thought my

neck'd stretch, I lost my guts and started whinin'. First time I'd ever done that. Then I seen just how true a gunman's friends are.

"Also," Bud added sheepishly, dropped his gaze, "I run up agin' a man just a mite faster'n I am with a gun. How'n the hell you done it after so long, I dunno, but you could a'spilled my stuffin' on the ground there if you'd wanted to. I still say you're the fastest man in Texas with a gun! . . . Guess I'm cured, Dave." The boy shrugged his shoulders and sighed. "I've seen and felt enough. I'll be lookin' for a little ranch to buy now, I guess."

"My offer's still open," Dave smiled.

"Nope. You'll be wantin' to drag in a blasted woman any day now. She was just waitin' till things blew over. Only let me hang around lately so's I wouldn't get riled and get a case up agin' you. She never did even know that we was kin. Think I'm headin' back home for awhile. You know what happened here tonite and oughtn't to have any trouble keepin' down a range war.

"I'll help Ma and Pa out on the ranch. They're gettin' pretty old. And you're a heap sillier'n I think you are, if you don't quit deputin' and take that woman out to your ranch. Go on over there now. She'll be waitin'. Patchin' you up will bring out her motherin' instincts."

"Think I will," Dave Malden said. "Get that hand o' yours patched up at Driftwood. Doc Sands ain't a hand to run off at the mouth. You better go on now so I won't have to explain your presence here. Far as I can see, Sam Stroble shot Mike Akley. Sam resisted arrest and me'n him shot it out. Tell the folks me'n June'll be up to visit with 'em."

"I will." Bud Malden smiled and walked away. "Say, Dave, name the first one after me. And if he ever shows a gun leanin' beat his little rump!"

"I will!" Dave Malden promised with a chuckle.

"And if that don't cure him," Tom Malden continued. "I'll have a talk with the youngin' myself!" He started walking away slowly, called back over his shoulder. "Uncle Tom'll have a heap o' things he can tell a youngin' headin' hellward. . . ."

THE LAST BUGLE CALL

By
JAMES P. WEBB

Nick said softly: "Promise me—that you won't be captured."



Alone at the under-manned frontier post, Nan stared long at the suicide gun her army husband had left behind. . . . A gleaming, deadly instrument which could be used either to destroy—or to protect!

A MESSENGER on a sweat-stained horse came racing down the slope toward the east gate of Fort Miller. His excited shout leaped ahead of him. Nan Stacy, working in her lean-to kitchen, lifted her head to listen. The messenger's long-running words carried clearly:

"Coconimo's out! Coconimo's out!"

Nan stood motionless, hearing the faint commotion inside the post. She realized that her heart was racing, and that fear was making her throat tight. She had heard much of old Coconimo, the wily Apache chief, but she had thought that his raiding days were over.

Nan put down her dishcloth and stood for a moment while she fought down her fear. When her breathing slowed and the almost painful hammering of her heart had eased, she went into the front room.

Her husband, Lieutenant Nick Stacy, had put on his tunic, and now he was buckling on his sidearms. She stared at his lean, brown face and his sunburned hair—and she heard the excited sounds increase out there on the parade ground.

Nick turned his head and looked at her. His eyes were blue, and the little quirk of a half-smile still rested at one corner of his mouth.

"A little action, maybe," he said. "You aren't going to worry, are you, Nancy?"

Nan shook her head, still looking at him. "But you told me that the Indian wars were over. You said there'd be no more danger if I came out here."

Nick's eyes clouded, but the little half-smile remained at the corner of his mouth. He came to her, took her in his arms and sniffed at her hair.

"I thought so," he said gently. "There hadn't been any action for some time. But I guess you never can tell. Well, this won't amount to much, and we'll soon have old Coconimo back on the reservation. Don't you worry, honey."

Nan buried her face in his tunic for a moment, liking the feel of the cloth. Then she pulled her head back and looked into his face.

"No," she said clearly, "I won't worry, Nick."

His arms tightened about her. He said, a trifle thickly: "I'm sorry I guessed wrong, honey, but there are a lot of officers' wives out here. It won't take us long to chase Coconimo into his hole."

"No," she said. "No, it won't take long."

But she knew that she was a coward, despite her brave words. She knew that *somebody* would be killed; *somebody* wouldn't come back from this campaign,

however brief it was. Her mind insisted upon picturing her Nick among the fallen. She had been in Arizona such a little time, and she had not seen the soldiers ride away to battle. She had not been present at a home-coming yet.

"This will be just a little job," he said. "Not like some of 'em have been. We'll be back in a week."

"Of course," she said, smiling up at him. "It won't be more than a week."

"And of course," he added, "I don't know yet that I'll go. They may leave me here."

She averted her gaze, and her smile slowly faded. "But you wouldn't like that, Nick."

"A little excitement helps," he said.

Nan waited in the front room, nervous and unhappy, while Nick answered the call of the bugle.



THROUGH the flimsy wall, she could hear her next-door neighbor, Mrs. Jarvis, moving around—moving around and waiting, as Nan was waiting, but with the difference that Mrs. Jarvis had been through it all many times before. Nan sensed that for Mrs. Jarvis this was routine.

Nan heard Lieutenant Jarvis enter the apartment next door, and involuntarily she listened.

"They cut off our wood train," Jarvis was saying. "Must have been at least a hundred of the devils. They killed every man but one." His voice rose a trifle. "We're going after the red devil in force. We'll make him pay for that."

"I hope you do, George," Mrs. Jarvis said. "Take care of yourself, dear."

There was a moment of silence. Then Jarvis said: "Keep your gun loaded. There won't be many men left here."

"I will," Mrs. Jarvis answered. "Hurry back."

Jarvis went out quickly, and there was silence.

Nan waited tensely, listening for Nick's footsteps. And then abruptly they came. Nick burst into the room, his lean face and blue eyes aghast.

"Honey," he said, "they swooped down on our wood train. It was an ambush, and

the redskins had the best of it, they say. So now we've got to get out after 'em, but it won't take long."

Nan looked at him steadily. "Nick," she asked softly, "were many of the soldiers killed?"

Nick frowned. "Well, no, not very many, honey. Of course, it was an ambush. You know how it is—"

Yes, Nan thought, she knew how it was. All but one of the soldiers with the wood train had been killed. What if the cavalry troop which was about to start in search of the Apaches were ambushed, too? Would even *one* man escape? Even if one did get away, there was small chance that the lucky one would be Nick.

Nan looked at her husband, and her heart sank. She wondered why fate had ordered things so that her Nick was a frontier soldier, when he might just as well have been stationed in the East.

She realized that Nick was staring at her, puzzled by her expression. She moved close to him, put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"I know how it is," she said gently. "You'll soon be back, and in the meantime I'll be lonely."

He drew away from her awkwardly, and she saw with a start that he had a pistol in his left hand.

"Look, honey," he said. "I'm leaving this gun here with you. It's loaded. Most of the men are going to chase old Coconimo, and the fort won't be well defended." His voice broke a little, and he paused. He swallowed hard, then went on quickly: "Coconimo's a wily old devil. If he should happen to give us the slip and attack the fort while we're away, I want you to promise me—"

Her wide eyes were steady. She said: "Promise you what, Nick?"

Nick's glance shifted away from her. "That you won't be captured."

Nan had heard some of the other women talking about what happened to women and children who were captured by the Apaches. She shuddered, looked at the revolver in Nick's hand.

"I won't be captured, Nick," she whispered.

But when she did not reach for the weapon, her husband put the gun on the bed. . . .

Nan did not go out to the parade ground to see the troops leave. Vaguely, she heard the bustling sounds of preparation, and she knew when the soldiers were ready to ride. Then she heard the high, shrill notes of the fifes and was dimly aware of the tune they played: *The Girl I Left Behind Me*.

After ten minutes, Nan went to the door and looked out. The parade ground lay before her eyes, a level, dusty, vacant expanse. An air of solitude, almost of desolation, enveloped the post, although a man in uniform could be seen here and there. But most of the men, Nan knew, were gone to hunt down the Apaches.

Mrs. Jarvis appeared in her own doorway. She must have read Nan's fear in her face; for she stepped outside and approached.

"They'll soon be back," Mrs. Jarvis said. "There's nothing to worry about."

Nothing to worry about! Didn't Mrs. Jarvis realize that even though the troops probably would defeat the Indians, there was still something to cause uneasiness? Had Mrs. Jarvis been so long a frontier army wife that she had become hardened to the thought that her own husband might not be among the living when the troops returned and the shrill fife played again?

Nan managed to smile. "I'm not worried, Mrs. Jarvis. I know they can easily beat the Indians."

Mrs. Jarvis was several years older than Nan, but she was still a handsome woman. Her eyes were clear and calm, her chin firm, her skin slightly tanned. She said:

"When you've seen it happen as many times as I have, dear, you'll learn to take things as they come. It's the only way. Just keep on remembering, every minute, that they'll be riding back soon. Perhaps in two or three days."

"Of course they will," Nan said, without conviction.

But would Nick Stacy be among them? Would George Jarvis come back?



THE rest of the day Nan kept to herself, thinking. Would the time come when she could see the men ride out of the post and have no misgiv-

ings? Nan did not think so. She did not believe that Mrs. Jarvis had reached that point. Mrs. Jarvis had merely learned not to allow her feelings to become apparent. Inward agony must attend the army life always, every time the life thrilled.

Two days passed. Then a grizzled trapper mounted on a shaggy pony which had been running fast and long approached the sally-port and was stopped by a sentinel. A buzz of excitement and apprehension ran through the officers' quarters and reached Nan's ears. The trapper was bringing news—bad news.

Nan did not go outside. Had the troop been wiped out by the Apaches? Nan tried to close her mind into a blank wall of nothingness, but she did not succeed. She was so nervous that her hands shook when Mrs. Jarvis came to the door.

"He says the Apaches attacked a settler's cabin on Salt River," Mrs. Jarvis said. "He wanted troops, and he didn't know that every available man was already out on the trail of the Indians."

Nan sat down suddenly on the edge of the bed and buried her face in her shaking hands. Mrs. Jarvis crossed the room softly and placed a hand on Nan's head.

"You'll get used to it, dear," the older woman said. "We all went through this stage, but it passed after a while. You'll get used to it."

"I don't see how I ever can," Nan said miserably, without looking up. "I guess I'm just a coward."

"Oh, no, you aren't," Mrs. Jarvis replied cheerfully. "It isn't that, at all. It's just that you have to get used to it." She paused, then went on. "The attack on the settler's cabin probably means that our men haven't come in contact with the Indians at all."

Nan lifted her head. "But they will."

Mrs. Jarvis hesitated an instant; then she said: "Yes, I think they will. But the sooner they drive that old warrior into submission the better. Don't you see that, dear?"

Nan nodded.

"Yes, I see that."

She had regained control of herself now. Mrs. Jarvis went over to the door; she paused there and looked back at the younger woman for a moment.

"It's just that we don't know what's

happening out there," Mrs. Jarvis said at last, softly. "You wouldn't be afraid if you were out there with them."

Nan looked at Mrs. Jarvis dumbly. Then as the other woman turned to go, Nan's voice broke out in quick words: "Oh, I'd die then! I simply couldn't stand to be there."

Another day passed, the slow minutes seeming to shrivel and dry up in the hot sunlight. The sun was low in the west when sudden shrill yells woke the silence beyond the stockade walls, and a rifle sounded at the sally-port.

The few men—scarcely a score of them, commanded by a sergeant—ran across the parade ground to man the portholes.

"Apaches!"

The cry rang in Nan's head and left her dazed for a moment. The Indians had doubled back, eluded the pursuing troops, and now they were attacking the undermanned fort. A moment ago, a deep silence had hung over the post; now the desert was alive with mad sounds of violence. The nearby voices of the few soldiers, and the fierce cries of the attackers, and the sharper sound of the guns, both within and without the stockade, mingled in an uproar which left Nan momentarily hypnotized.

Dimly, she remembered the promise which her husband had extracted from her when he had left the revolver. She wondered if she would have nerve enough to shoot herself and thus rob the Apaches of some part of their victory. She crossed the room and picked up the sixgun from where it lay on a chest. The weapon was heavy in her hands.

The door burst open and Nan whirled. Mrs. Jarvis stood in the opening, and Nan saw that she held two rifles. The woman's face was grim, the line of her mouth hard and resolute.

"I've got a gun for you," Mrs. Jarvis said. "Our men can't hold off the attack. Too many of the Indians. We'll have to fight, too. Come on."

Mechanically, Nan moved toward Mrs. Jarvis. They, the army wives, would have to fight, too. For liberty. For life. For honor. They must help defend the undermanned post. The officers' wives had been instructed in the art of firing a rifle. They had had target practice. Even

Nan, a comparative newcomer to the Western frontier, had been taught something about guns.

Nan took one of the rifles and followed Mrs. Jarvis. Suddenly Nan was aware of a strange stirring in her blood; a sensation hitherto unknown to her. A fierce exultation, as savage, as relentless, as unreasoning as the pulse of battle itself, beat through her mind and swept her beyond fear. If the Apaches were defeated here at the post—maybe the troops wouldn't have to fight the Indians later.



NAN and Mrs. Jarvis mounted to firing position at loopholes. The Indians, mounted on shaggy ponies, were circling the fort, and Nan saw that most of the possessed rifles. She could see the puffs of smoke from the muzzles as the marauders fired. She put the rifle-stock against her slender shoulder and tried to draw a bead on one of the dark riders. When she thought she had succeeded, Nan pressed the trigger. But the Indian she fired at rode on. She had missed.

But some of the soldiers and some of the other wives were shooting straighter. Nan saw several of the Apaches tumble off their running ponies and lie sprawled and motionless in the dust.

Powdersmoke swirled along the stockade wall, and Nan's nostrils caught the acrid smell of battle as she quickly reloaded the rifle with one of the shells which Mrs. Jarvis had given her. The taste of battle was in her throat and on her tongue, and the sight and sound of conflict were all around her. And in Nan's heart was a strange, throbbing, wild exultation which was entirely alien to her experience.

Nan did not take time to wonder about this now. She sighted the rifle again and felt the kick of the stock against her shoulder as the gun fired. She saw a horse stumble and fall, and she knew that it was her bullet that had hit the animal. The rider sprang clear of the falling horse and ran on. Then one of the other rifles cut him down, too, and he lay on his face thirty feet from his horse.

Nan reloaded and fired, reloaded and fired, until the actions involved became

automatic, and she did not think of them at all. Her sense of smell became accustomed to the swirling powdersmoke, and she ceased to notice it. Her ears seemed to lose their acuteness, and the noise scarcely touched her consciousness.

It was as if she were alone, intent only upon firing the heavy, kicking, single-shot rifle. She knew dimly that the Apaches were riding closer to the walls now. She knew that one or two of the soldiers had been hit. But all the acuteness of her mind was upon the dark, moving targets.

Then suddenly, something else registered in Nan's mind. It was the blare of a bugle, somewhere outside, sounding the thrilling notes of the charge. She heard a medley of voices around, and she saw the copper-skinned attackers break into flight toward the west. And then she saw, moving up from the southeast, a large body of mounted men. The troops!

Nan lowered her rifle from the loophole and peered out intently. The cavalry swept past, battle flag flying, bugle blaring, horses and men half lost in a swirl of gray dust. Nan thought she saw, though she couldn't be sure, the gallant figure of Nick Stacy.

Then the troops were gone into the west, hot on the heels of the fleeing Indians; and out on the plain were the bodies of the Apaches who had been hit by bullets from within the stockade.

Nan was conscious of a new emotion now. She realized that she was proud of her husband, proud of his part in the conflict to conquer this wild, vast land. She was glad that Nick had not been stationed in the East.

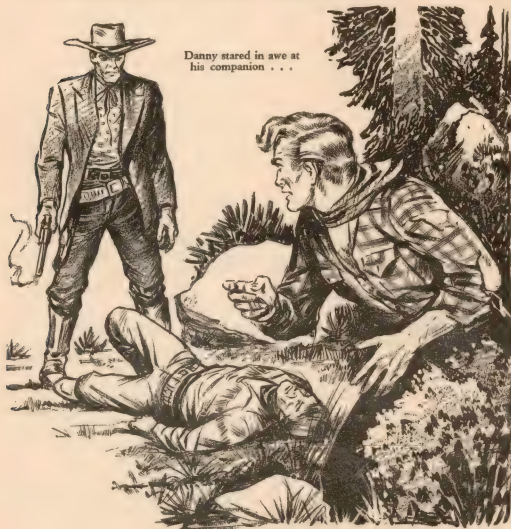
Someone touched Nan's arm. 'She turned her head and saw Mrs. Jarvis, her face smeared and moist, staring at her.

"Don't worry, dear," Mrs. Jarvis said gently. "Come on. We'll have to see who's been wounded and care for them. It'll be all right. Nick will come back. Maybe tomorrow."

Nan walked beside Mrs. Jarvis, swinging the heavy rifle in her right hand. She realized suddenly that she was hot and dusty and tired—and happy.

"Yes," she said softly. "Nick will come back. Of course, he'll come back. They'll all come back. A few Indians can't harm our men."

Traitor of the Natchez Trace



Danny stared in awe at his companion . . .

By RYERSON JOHNSON

Because he carried no gold, Danny Dow, pioneer mail rider, had safely traveled the outlaw-ruled Natchez Trace for six years. But on this trip he carried, wrapped in a gruesome clay ball, his own ticket to hell—that would be punched by the first cut-throat he met.

DANNY DOW heard the crackling in the cane even before the man on the shaggy horse lunged out to bar the way. Danny pulled in on his stocky Spanish pony and waited, tight-lipped, his gray eyes cool, while the man from the woods walked his horse closer on the trail.

Sunlight dribbled through the green thicket. It made glints on the man's pistols in their saddle holsters. It flashed wickedly from the long skinning knife in a sandal-sheath.

The War of the Revolution was well over. Those rebels against the King were pushing West, filtering down through the Cumberlands, following Boon's trail. The raw new gateway town of Knoxville boomed. It spilled half its surging population every day onto the dim trails going West. The whole great Valley of the Mississippi was stirring—all except the Chickasaw and Choctaw strips.

It was 500 miles through these Indian Nations on the winding Natchez Trace—500 miles through swamp and canebrake and wilderness desolation. Here no law had penetrated, and no religion. Renegade white men, crowded from more ordered lands, found the territory a pirate's paradise. The dark wilderness fed, clothed and hid them—and provided them with victims in the farmers and traders who flat-boated their season's products down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers and came back overland with their gold.

The land-pirates robbed—and killed cruelly in order that the robberies might go unreported, in order that they might the more easily rob again. Traders who made the northward trip and arrived at Nashville *safely with their gold*, boasted about it for the rest of their lives.

Danny Dow didn't boast. But he had been riding the trail in safety every month of the year for six straight years!

He didn't carry gold though. A messenger on the Trace, he served the government on the mail route that had been established between the American settlements and the Spanish Province of Louisiana. Six years of it, and nothing that could happen in the big woods could surprise him.

That was why he sat his pony quietly when the man lunged from the canebrake and rode close. The man, Danny recognized, was Little Yellen. With his brother, Big Yellen, he had been levying on the Trace for years. No bigger than Danny, under his whisker stubble Little Yellen was swarthy as an Indian.

With animal furtiveness the outlaw's glance moved both ways on the trail, then fastened on Danny with a look of hard speculation.

"What news ye got?"

"Not much." Danny cocked a leg over the horn of his saddle and relaxed. "You

know May-pole Maggy's place in Natchez-Under-the-Hill? She got burned out. Laid it onto the toffs from the bluff. They never even sent the fire department down. Maggy's gone to New Orleans."

Little Yellen's eyes, chips of blue quartz, were still roving. Danny could tell that there was something working in that warped little possum mind. He bided his time and tried again.

"You heard about Yazoo Nappycot? Lost his shirt in a game of All-Fours in Baton Rouge. To a couple of keelboat men down from Pittsburgh. You know how snortin' mad Yazoo gets? He pitched into 'em both, swingin' a bottle. They kilt him."

Little Yellen grunted, but his eyes remained disinterested—and cunning. His hair shagged over his neck and forehead, but in the back he wore it long in a kind of scalp lock, with beaded horse hair braided through it. A leather shirt, the fringes dirt-slick and curled, hung loosely on him. He wore coarse butternut jeans and moccasins.

Danny gave up trying to interest him, and just waited. Women or fights—those were the things Little Yellen usually was avid to hear about. Danny had a kind of silent understanding with the Trace outlaws. When they stopped him and asked him for it, he passed them out the news of the towns. Beyond that, he left them alone and they left him alone.

Six years of this, and it was enough to wring a man's stomach dry. But what could you do? He didn't like fraternizing with trail butchers so casual about murder they didn't even stop to wash the blood out from under their fingernails. But everybody wanted the mail to go through. Then this was the price they had to pay—that their mail carrier had polite truck with murderers.

Some of those smug ones in the towns who looked at him askance—who were they to put on such a holy face? They knew what was going on in these woods. Why didn't *they* do something about it? Too busy grabbing for land and chasing the almighty dollar, that was why.

Little Yellen grunted again. "I'm on the way back from a trip to the towns myself," he offered.

"Yeah? I didn't see you."

"You wasn't supposed to," Little Yellen told him coldly, then came out flat with what was bothering him. "You see anybody on the trail this mornin'? A long money-bags maybe, dried-up and oldish, wearin' a pepper 'n salt coat, and stridin' a gray mare?"

Little Yellen's lips clamped over the words, like a steel trap closing, and he leaned closer, peering.

Danny waved him back. "What do you think," he asked sharply, "that I'm scoutin' for you?"

"I asked ye a question," Little Yellen threatened.

"And I give you the answer. I'm like the Chinese monkey. On this trail I see nothin', hear nothin', tell nothin'. I go about my business—you go about yours. You know that's how it is."

"I know that's how it was. Here of late I ain't so sure."

"What you meanin' by that?"

"You won't help us. Not ever. Would you help *them* maybe? Jest once in a while maybe?" Little Yellen's lips thinned out again, straight and bloodless across his meager face. Little Yellen killed sometimes, they said, just for the fun of it.



SIX years on the Trace, brushing elbows with bush-killers, had given Danny Dow plenty of assurance. The trick was never to let these fellows know you were afraid of them. Steal their thunder. It confused, then quieted them. Every time.

Danny said; "If I ever went out for helpin' *them*, I wouldn't want to let you know, would I? You'd tuck a long knife under my belt, scoop out my guts, fill my belly up with sand, and dump me in the first crick we come to, fer the eels to chew on. Ain't that right?"

Little Yellen's shoulders sank gently as he sighed. Some of the glassiness went out of his eyes. "That's right," he said. "Sure—sure. That's what I'd do." He laughed then, a laugh with plenty of noise, but no mirth.

He heeled his horse in closer, reached over and started fumbling with the straps on Danny's mail pouch.

"Hey!" Danny protested.

Little Yellen turned on him, leering. "Maybe you're carryin' gold. Maybe them eels been waitin' too long to be fed."

"You know our understandin'. I carry no gold and no gun."

"I don't know nothin' for sure," Little Yellen said flatly. "Not till I take a look for myself. Big Yellen and me talked it over before I left for the towns. It's been slim pickin's here of late. You maybe ain't to blame. But I told him I was anyhow goin' to stop you this trip and find out."

"You won't find nothin'," Danny snapped, "but some letters and some newspapers."

Little Yellen went on looking, and it was just as Danny had said. Little Yellen dumped all the mail back except one long envelope of heavy parchment paper, impressive with its ornate writing and seals of red wax.

"What's this?" he demanded.

"How do I know?" Danny growled. "It says it's from the Spanish Governor General of Louisiana, and it's addressed to the Governor of Tennessee—" He broke off, said quickly, "Hey, you can't do that!"

Little Yellen had pulled out his knife and was working the blade under the wax seals.

"Tamperin' with the U. S. mails," Danny protested again, "that's agin' the law—" He stopped, overwhelmed by his own foolishness. Law on the Natchez Trace! But some day there would be. He only hoped he lived to see the day.

With sullen concentration Little Yellen went ahead and opened the envelope. "From one Governor to another," he said, "it's liable to be somethin' concernin' how I make my livin'." Some of the glassiness came back in his eyes. "You know in Louisiana they lately hanged four our boys? Uncle Sam, he ought to go down there and clean them Spaniards up."

Little Yellen opened the letter. A look of disgust crossed his face. "It's writ in Spanish," he said.

"I could of told you that," Danny grumbled. He reached out and took the letter from the envelope before the violently unstable mind of the outlaw could dictate destruction.

Danny waited then, swallowing his anger, while Little Yellen pawed through the

blanket roll behind the saddle, and hefted the bag of shelled corn that Danny carried for the horse.

"All right," Little Yellen said, giving Danny a surly look, "you got a clean ticket. But maybe I'll have better luck next time."

Danny clucked to the pony, and started moving. He heard Little Yellen call after him, threateningly, "You're goin' to run into Big Yellen down the trail. He'll search you too. We're goin' to be watchin' you close from here on out. We find any gold on you, and it's the knife—and eels." Danny put the pony to a hard gallop to make up time. It was slow going at best. Unseasonable rains had softened the trail, making it a yellow quagmire. The creeks were running fast and high, lapping at the pole bridges. Places that ordinarily could be forded had to be swum.

He came out of the cane and jimson flats and into the dark forest again, where beech and oak trees stretched shaggy arms over the trail, lifting to a height of 200 feet to blot out the sky. The silence here was something that gnawed at your mind if you let it. That was the trouble with the Trace bandits. About all of them had the bush-jumps.

All of a sudden it wasn't silent any more. A squirrel chattered, and a jay bird started a raucous clamor. A cat bird screeched, and a family of wrens poured on their teeth-on-edge scolding. The disturbance centered ahead where the trail dipped to a nameless creek bed. Danny scanned the green in-bellying wall of trailside growth as he moved along.

They saw each other at about the same instant, Danny and the "long money-bags, dried-up and oldish, wearing a pepper 'n salt coat." The man appeared from behind a tangle of blackberry briars and seedling gum trees. He came, waving at Danny and climbing a clay bank, with the wet clay clinging in yellow gouts to his boots. There was more clay on his clothes. It just about covered him everywhere. He certainly was a sorry looking sight.

THE man was panting when he topped the bank. "You're the mail carrier, ain't you?" he gasped, his hand lifting vaguely to indicate Danny's saddle pouch. "Been looking for you.

Knowned you was due somewheres along. I'm Mot Lathrington from the Illinois country. I got held up—"

"I know," Danny interrupted. "I met Little Yellen back the trail a ways. He put you afoot?"

"No. I got my mare hid back of that spider-webbin' of wild grape and hazel scrub. I jumped her into the crick—"

Danny nodded. "You done well. Little Yellen's like a Choctaw when it comes to trackin'."

Mot Lathrington's jaw with its ridiculous stub of graying beard thrust out with decision. "Probably you could advise me what to do. I—I'm carryin' considerable weight of metal—"

"You're in the Devil's own fix," Danny told him. This wasn't the first traveler who had ever appealed to him for help. This was, in fact, an old weary story. Danny turned in saddle, and waved behind him, down-trail. "Little Yellen's lookin' for you thataway." He looked back and waved up-trail. "Big Yellen, I happen to know, is holed in somewheres up ahead. With the woods so wet, and runnin' out to low land and swamps on both sides, you got no choice but to stick to the trail. I ain't tryin' to scare you. Just givin' you the size."

"But there must be some way—"

"You could bury your gold, and try ridin' along with me. If you ain't packin' gold you got a chance. Later you could try comin' back for your gold when the woods are dried out, so's you can work across country when you have to, off the trail."

Mot Lathrington shook his head. "That'd be too late."

Danny shrugged. "How come you're ridin' alone anyhow? You should of waited for a party to make up."

"I know. But I was in a hurry—and I didn't think the Trace could be as lawless as they said."

"Hardly no one does," Danny said dryly. "That's why things can go on like this year after year. The ones who could tell are mostly dead and belly-weighted in crick mud."

"I—I got to get my gold through," Mot Lathrington said desperately.

"I hope you make it, friend," Danny told him. "If you do, maybe you'll try

stirrin' the government to doin' something. A disgrace and blot on the stars and stripes, that's what it is. The Spaniards protect their part of the trail from Natchez into New Orleans. Why can't Uncle Sam string out a few soldiers between Natchez and Nashville?" Danny's voice was rising. This was something that had been bitterly on his mind for a long time. "I'll tell you why. Too many politicians in too many county courthouses, soft-squattin' in cane-bottomed chairs and spittin' tobacco juice in brass spittoons. They just can't be bothered."

The traveler was looking at Danny in close speculation. "I've heard it said the outlaws never bother you."

"You insinuatin'?" Danny bristled.

"Jus' remarkin'," Lathrington said meekly. "I was thinkin' if you know them, you could take my gold through for me. I'd be glad to pay you whatever—"

"Not a chance," Danny flagged him down. "Be glad to do it for nothin', but they've got suspicious of me here of late. Little Yellen stopped and searched me this mornin'. His brother is bound to do the same farther along the trail." His voice rose bitterly again. "There's plenty of folks thinks my appeasin' of the outlaws extends to active collaboration with 'em. It ain't so. I do my job, that's all. I carry the mail."

Lathrington started pleading then. "Why I got to get the gold through," he said, "it ain't all mine. There was seven of us signed papers to the Wabash and Western Land Development Co., and took up land on the Wabash River in the Illinois country. We been five years breakin' our backs clearin' that land, half starvin' our wives and children the meanwhile."

"Last year we had our first sizable crops. We pooled together, and they elected me to flatboat everything down river to New Orleans. Now I got to get home with the gold. I got to get home fast. If I don't, the Land Company takes the land back. You see, they're sharpers. They get the land cleared this way for nothin'. When we first sign their papers they know it's goin' to be nigh impossible for us to meet their agreement. But we don't know that—not till too late—"

Danny sighed. There was nothing new about the story. It was happenin' all over

the West. Thieves worked inside the law as well as outside of it, as the settlers swarmed in, eager and unwary, heeding only the call of the new land.

"All right," Danny said wearily, "I'll see what I can do to get your gold through for you. But how the hell am I going to work it? My blanket roll, the feed bag, the mail sack—no other places to hide it, and all three are bound to get searched." He lifted his glance moodily from the yellow clay bank. His grin was thin and wolfish. "Maybe I got an idea. You heard about the time not so long back that a posse caught up with a river pirate they called Charlie Busha? They got him just in under the Tennessee line, and they brought his head back inside of a big ball of clay in order to preserve same, and prove up for the bounty that was put on Charlie Busha."

"I heard about it," Mot Lathrington said.

"So did Big Yellen," Danny said tightly. "He knowed Charlie Busha. All right, what do you reckon Big Yellen would think if he stopped us and seen a big ball of clay inside my mail bag, with maybe a letter tied onto it from the Governor of Louisiana addressed to the Governor of Tennessee?"

The breath caught in Mot Lathrington's throat. "He'd figger it was another head, wouldn't he? That on the Spanish side they'd captured some desperado wanted on this side, and was sendin' the head up here for proof!"

Danny nodded.

"But instead of a head, it'd be my gold inside the clay ball!"

Danny looked at the traveler steadily. "How's it strike you?"

"Might work—if he only *looked* at the clay ball. But what if he picked it up? I'm carryin' a heavy poke. He could tell by the weight—"

"I thought of that too," Danny observed. "So it's no good puttin' the gold in the clay ball. We'll just have to put it somewhere like inside my blanket roll—and use the clay ball for a blind, try to get Big Yellen so curious about it that he'll forget to look any farther for the gold."

Mot Lathrington stared doubtfully. "Purty big risk, ain't it?"

"You know any better way?"

"No," Lathrington said ruefully, "I don't."

"Then let's get started. While I work up the clay ball, you go back along the trail a little ways and cover for me. It's just possible that Little Yellen has took a notion in that shake-brained possum head of his'n to start back in this direction. He's due to join Big Yellen up ahead here somewheres, and it could just as well be sooner as later.

It was sooner!



DANNY put his pony down the bank, and was building up his ball out of clay that was firm enough to work, and still would hold its shape, kneading in some sticks and leaves for reinforcement, when his bush-wise ears heard the soft pounding of hoofs on the trail. He dropped his work and turned to bore through the creekside tangle of undergrowth. Trumpet creeper, whortleberry, and wild plum scrub reached out to tear at his clothes, and he was still fighting his way through the green thicket when he heard the two pistol shots.

The echoes rolled suddenly through the bush, stark, portentous, squeezing the waiting menace of the wilderness into one high moment of realization, as when an animal screams in the dark. Sweating, muddy, bleeding from briar scratches, Danny got clear of the leafy fingers which bound him. He broke out onto the trail, and there was one dead man, and it was Little Yellen.

"What happened?" Danny demanded, running forward.

Mot Lathrington, dried-up, lank, clay-plastered, and scared looking, was standing there, his pistol loose in his dangling hand.

He looked dazedly at Danny. "He come along just like you was afeered he might. I—I braced him. He shot first. He missed. I didn't."

Danny rubbed at his jaw, looking at this old farmer with bright interest. "Friend, I don't mind sayin' I'm impressed."

Lathrington looked as though he, too, was overcome by his own deed. "He must

of killed maybe a hundret men in his time," he marveled.

Danny was looking in hard judgment at the body of Little Yellen huddled in the mud. "He sure is peaceful now, ain't he?" He turned to the traveler. "If there was more men of your speerit ridin' this trail, there'd be less like him."

"Then you ain't no-ways mad at me?" Mot Lathrington asked anxiously. "This dead man wasn't even a—a left-handed kind of friend of yours?"

Danny's weathered face turned a dull brick red. "Ain't you never goin' to get that idea out of your head?" he flared, angrily. "You and everybody that thinks on account I know a lot of these fellas by their front names, that I likewise consort with 'em—and maybe featherin' up my nest for my old age out of their blood money? What I do, I do so's the mail can go through. It ain't my shame. It's the public's—and the government's."

"Fergit I said anything," Mot Lathrington pleaded.

Danny quieted down. "It's all right," he conceded. "It's only that I've got to buck that kind of suspicionin' at towns both ends of my route. No matter; give me a hand with the carcass and we'll heave it into the crick."

"What'll we do about his horse?"

"Take the bit out of his mouth and leave him forage. He won't range far. Some traveler will some time pick him up."

Together they carried the body of Little Yellen, but when they were swinging it for the heave over the creek bank, Danny said sharply, "Wait a minute! I got another idea."

They lowered the body into the clay at their feet. In growing excitement Danny said, "It's an idea how to make our story stick stronger with Big Yellen when we meet him and he starts askin' questions about the clay ball we'll be carryin'."

Danny reached to grasp the scalp lock of Little Yellen's braided hair. The outlaw's head lolled under Danny's hands, and Danny's eyes glowed with such hard speculation that Mot Lathrington stirred nervously, and said in a shocked voice:

"You don't mean you aim to put this hold-up fella's head for *real* inside the clay?"

"No, no," Danny said, "not the head—

just the scalp lock. Think a minute. What would Big Yellen do if he seen this hair stickin' out of the clay ball? He'd get so excited, wouldn't he, that he never would think to search through the rest of my gear for the gold?"

Mot Lathrington's Adam's-apple went up and down on his skinny neck as he swallowed in apprehension. "He might forget about lookin' for the gold, but he'd haul off and kill us both wouldn't he, if he cotched us with what he thought was his brother's head?"

"He ain't goin' to think it's his brother's head. He's goin' to think it's his own."

"His own head in the clay? You daft or what?"

Lathrington watched with growing distrust and worry as Danny got up and scrimmed around and came back with two small pieces of rock. There were a few glass beads strung on the horsehair that bound Little Yellen's hair in its braided lock. What Danny did was take the ornamental beads between the two pieces of rock and break them one by one. Then with Little Yellen's own knife he cut the lock off close to the head. He rolled Little Yellen's body off the creek bank then, and watched the water suck and pull as the flood current towed its burden into deep-woods oblivion.

After Danny had finished impressing the hair-lock in the clay ball, he stood back and viewed his handiwork, explaining, "Big Yellen wears his hair the same way Little Yellen did. With one difference. He never put none of them milky-blue beads in it. So you see what we got? From the looks of it outside, it could be Big Yellen's head in the ball."

"Yes, but—"

Danny moved over to his pony and reached inside the mail pouch. He brought out the long envelope from the Spanish Governor General of the Province of Louisiana. He opened it and spread out the letter for Mot Lathrington to examine closely.

"I got to carry ink and a quill for folks to sign sometimes for mail I deliver." Danny's fingers traced the open half-line spaces between paragraphs in the letter. "Plenty of room for writin' in Big Yellen's name in places. Now you see what I'm drivin' at? Big Yellen can't read

Spanish no more than what we can. But he can read English a little. When he sees his name all through this letter, he'll naturally conclusion that the Spanish Governor General is talkin' about him and his head."

"But this Big Yellen," Lathrington protested dazedly, "will know his own head can't be two places at once, on his shoulders and in this ball of clay—"

That wolf grin shown on Danny's face again. "That's just the point," he said. "He'll figure they've captured somebody on the Spanish side that they've mistook for him. He'll figure he's got the joke on two separate governors. If I know Big Yellen right, he'll laugh so much he'll entire forget to finish searchin' us."

Mot Lathrington nodded in excited appreciation. But then he sobered down. "Tamperin' with the U. S. mails—that's considerable of a crime, ain't it? Especially a Governor's letter!"

"You leave me worry about that," Danny growled. "The Governor of Tennessee will no doubt be some puzzled to see Big Yellen's name all through the letter. But whatever is writ in Spanish will still be there. . . . Now I got to go look for some sticky milkweed to stick these seals back in place again so Big Yellen'll never know we opened the envelope."



THEY rode all the rest of that day and a part of the next morning, with the deep woods breathing its silent menace always. "When it happens," Danny predicted, "it'll likely be in a canebrake. Wildcats, snakes, and outlaws—they all hant the canebrakes."

Danny wasn't missing. At a place where the trail was hedged in by cane so dense that the eye could penetrate no more than ten feet, Big Yellen appeared to bar the way—Big Yellen and three other long-haired bushies who commonly trailed with him. Danny knew them all by sight. One, a cheek-scarred grizzly, Milt Yancy, he knew by name.

Danny played the same kind of game he had with Little Yellen the day before. "Howdy, boys," he greeted, and slumped in his saddle, letting them ride close.

"Who's he?" Big Yellen poked a dirt-slick thumb in the direction of Mot Lathrington.

Danny had a story ready. "He's a U. S. Mail inspector ridin' the Trace with me this trip."

"Seems like," Big Yellen said with heavy suspicion, "there's been a awful heap of inspectin' the last year or so. I been leavin' you get by with that story on the others. This one I'm dressin' down."

"Sure," Danny said agreeably. "Look him over. In your business a fella can't be too careful."

"Your damn right, he can't. While I'm about it, I'm lookin' you over too."

"Help yourself," Danny said. "I got lots of time."

Big Yellen stared sullenly. Except that he was bigger, he was a dead ringer for his brother. The same black hair tied in the Indian braid. The same animal furtiveness. The sharp sharp nose and mean little eyes, and thin lips making a straight slash across his face and nearly buried in whisker stubble.

"You see Little Yellen?" he demanded.

Danny nodded. "He stopped me yesterday in the cane t'other side of Nansco's Lick."

"It's a good thing you never lied to me," Big Yellen said, his eyes flat and glassy. "I knowed you seen him, on account he said he was goin' to time his trip up from the Spanish side so's he could check on you."

"He didn't find nothin'," Danny said. "Neither will you. I'd be a blind-squirrel fool to try to pack gold past you. Think I want your knife—and eels?"

"You'll git 'em," Big Yellen threatened, "the first time you try to put anything past me." His grimy hand lifted to scowling Milt Yancy, hulking in saddle beside him. "You and the boys search t'other'n. I'll take care Danny."

As he kneed his horse in close and reached for the strap on the mail pouch, Danny flashed a reassuring glance at Mot Lathrington. Inside Danny's coat, stuck in his belt, was one of Mot Lathrington's pistols. Mot, himself, had kept the other. If things came to the worst, they each had one bullet to shoot. Two bullets against four!

The odds, Danny deflected starkly, weren't even as good as that. Old farmer Lathrington had been lucky, that was all, when he dropped Little Yellen yesterday. That kind of lightning-luck didn't hit twice, so if it came to a showdown it was Danny Dow on his own. Again these four who lived with murder he wouldn't have the chance of a sick rabbit in a hound pack.

Well, no reason to think it might come to a showdown. He had planned for this moment inside and out. He said now:

"Ain't you wantin' to hear the news of the towns? There's a good story goin' around 'bout Mike Fink and a wrestlin' bear. On Stack Island it was, and true they say—"

Big Yellen cut him short. "Little's due in here today or tomorrow," he growled. He always called his brother, "Little." That was all, just "Little." Of all things on earth Little Yellen was probably the only thing that could strike a spark of human sentiment from Big Yellen. "Little's jus' been to the towns. He'll tell me all I need to know."

He had the pouch open now, and was pulling at the moss which Danny had plastered onto the clay ball.

"What the hell's that?"

"What's it look like?" Danny countered flatly.

"Ball o' clay."

Danny nodded. "That's what I was told when I signed for it in the Post Office at Natchez, and I had no call to doubt it."

"It's still damp."

Danny looked bored. "My instructions calls for keepin' it that way. Clay preserves better damp. Every night I sprinkle some water on it."

Big Yellen yanked the pouch around so the sun would shine in. He caught hold of the braided lock of hair sticking out of the ball with the long envelope fastened to it. He looked at Danny with heavy-lidded suspicion.

"What's inside that clay ball?"

"Just what you're thinkin'."

"A head—like Charlie Busha that time?"

"Like Charlie Busha," Danny said.

The others had quit their searching of Mot Lathrington's trail-gear now, and were looking over, interested. A tension grew upon them all.

"What you sweatin' for?" Big Yellen asked Danny.

"Hot," Danny said.

Big Yellen growled the question finally that they waited for. "Who's head is it?"

Danny shrugged. "They never said.

"Got hair like mine," Big Yellen said broodingly.

"Don't prove nothin'," Danny pointed out. "Every here and there in the bush you run acrost a fella wearin' it thataway."

BIG YELLEN pulled the envelope free from the hair. He squinted at it for a long time in the sun. "It's from the Spanish Governor General of Louisiana," he said, and he sounded impressed. "He's sendin' the head to the Governor of Tennessee."

Danny nodded. "What I figure, it's somebody that's wanted bad on this side, that they've cotched down under the line. Must be somebody awful important for 'em to go to so much trouble."

Sunlight glinted on bright steel as Big Yellen whipped out a knife and started prying at the red wax that bore the Governor's seal, precisely as Little Yellen had done the day before.

It was history repeating itself all around, because Danny said sharply, "Hey, you can't do that! Tamperin' with the mails—there's a law—"

But Big Yellen was already doing it. He unfolded the letter and held it between his dirt-greased hands. His mean little eyes blinked as the sun struck the white paper. He looked up.

"It's writ in Spanish," he said, in disgust.

"Sure," Danny said, "what'd you think?"

But Big Yellen was looking at the letter again. Suddenly he let out a whoop and started laughing. He slapped at his jean-clad thigh—and kept on laughing. His men were staring. So was Danny, who put on a good act, pretending he didn't know what in the world had got into Big Yellen.

Big Yellen calmed down enough at last to hold up the letter and prod at it with his fingers. "Look," he said, "look. It's writ in Spanish, but I can read *my* name in it, all through it everywhere. *Big Yellen*, it says!" He shook the paper. "Don't

you see what that means? The Governor thinks he's got *my* head in that ball o' clay! He's cotched some rovin' woods gunner, and he's mistook him fer me, more'n like on account of the hair. He thinks he's cotched me, and he's makin' the Governor o' Tennessee a present of my head! That there sure is a handsome joke on a couple o' Governors!"

He started laughing again—and this time everybody else was laughing with him. This was working out all right, Danny told himself tensely, and he swapped a quick glance with Mot Lathrington. They were as good as on their way now—with Big Yellen's blessing. Their hides were safe, and so was the gold. Why, it wouldn't be too surprising if Big Yellen even passed around a jug of his Monongahela whiskey.

Then, as suddenly as he had begun, Big Yellen quit laughing. He had yanked the ball of clay half out of the pouch and was examining the hair. He bent to look closer. Danny looked too.

Alarm stabbed through him. It coursed his whole nerve-taut body and tingled his toes. Big Yellen was pinching at some dried clay that was stuck to the hair. When Danny had cracked the beads between the two pieces of rock, he had taken pains to shake the hair and blow at it, to rid it of the shattered bead fragments. But now he could see the tiny splinter of milky-blue glass that was impressed in the clay. The splinter wasn't the only thing.

Big Yellen looked up, his eyes naked with dark hatred, cruel resolve. His lips that had been so tightly pressed that they were wholly buried in the stubble of his face, sprang apart, like the jaws of a steel trap opening. His words jetted.

"Somethin' you never knowed—that Little and me put different knots in the horse hair we used to fasten our scalp locks with. This here is Little's knot. That's a sliver of Little's beads in the clay. This here is Little's hair! . . . *You never took it offen him alive*. You talked to him yesterday, you said. You killed him—like I'm killin' you!"

Danny was doing his despairing best to wrestle the pistol from under his coat. But he was a mile and a rod too slow, and he knew it. Big Yellen's knife hand had already started its lightning strike—that

hand so practiced in murder that it knew to the fractional inch where to stab.

So after all it was the knife—and eels, Danny thought starkly—with no one outside the big woods knowing, with everyone forever continuing to think that Danny Dow was tainted with the outlaw brand. “*I knew he’d get it some day,*” the wisecracs would say. “*When thieves fall out—*”

Then the pistol shot laying its close echoes flatly across the trail. The pistol shot—and the knife of Big Yellen clawing short of Danny’s stomach, raking down to gash the leather mail pouch . . . and Big Yellen pitching helplessly from saddle between the horses, his face contorted in its death spasm.

That high-pitched scream of triumph was the old farmer’s! Mot Lathrington had scored again. First Little Yellen. Now Big Yellen. Unbelievable! But the evidence was here in Big Yellen’s bullet-weighted body.

The next shot came from that scarred grizzly, Milt Yancy. Danny didn’t feel anything, so he figured that the bullet must have reached out for the farmer. Danny had his own pistol in the clear now. The big hammer snapped down, the barrel spit ball and powder—and Milt Yancy, in the act of drawing his second pistol, doubled over in saddle and slipped off sideways to thump in the mud beside Big Yellen.

The horses were rearing, and the other two outlaws were putting more lead in the air—deadly close-in firing, so close that Danny felt the spit of powder on his face and caught the reek of gun smoke in his nostrils. He couldn’t tell if he was hit or not. But he was still in saddle. And so was the farmer.

Danny struck out with his empty pistol, leaning from saddle and bringing his arm down with all its tensioned strength. The force of the blow knocked the pistol from his hand—but the man who had the long barrel laid across his head was knocked from his horse too.

From the tail of his eye Danny saw the farmer and the last one of the outlaws tumble from their horses, locked in savage embrace. It must be all up with the farmer, Danny thought, and he felt a pang because the old geezer had fought incredibly well from the first to the last.

Danny did what he could. He went off his horse in a sprawling leap—but before he could reach the farmer to help him, the farmer helped himself. Amazingly, he pulled out of the fighting grapple and stood up. He had a knife in his hand and there was blood on the blade. The outlaw never did stir after that. Neither did the one that Danny had knocked from saddle, because a hoof from one of the pitching horses took up where Danny’s gun barrel had left off.

Danny’s eyes swept fiercely from the



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four dead men to the farmer. "You all right?" he called hoarsely.

Mot Lathrington was shaking himself. "Seems like," he gasped.

"Me too," Danny jerked, between breaths, but he still looked as though he didn't quite believe it.



A LITTLE later, sitting in the mud, resting, Danny wiped sweat and batted at gnats—and accepted a fill for his pipe from Mot Lathrington's pouch of home-cured roughcut.

"What riles me," Danny complained, "is we can't take credit for this with the public. Not if the mail's goin' to keep goin' through. News of what we done has got to stay buried in this canebrake, so's I can keep appeasin' the rest of the outlaws still leavin' on the Trace."

"You sound uncommon bitter," Mot Lathrington said.

"Wouldn't you be?" Danny flared. "Only half trusted by outlaws and honest men alike. All because of the—"

"The politicians spittin' in brass spittoons, and the land grabbers too busy with chasin' the almighty dollar. That the way of it?"

"Yeah," Danny said, then he noticed Mot Lathrington's sly peculiar smile. There was a question that had been burning at Danny's lips from the first. "Where'd you learn to fight so good?" he demanded.

At first Danny thought he wasn't hearing right, because Mot Lathrington answered quietly, "Fightin's my business, son."

"Huh? I thought farmin' was."

"I was bound to tell you that."

Danny's pipe went unregarded in his hand. "Hey, what's goin' on here?"

"You come close to it with what you told Big Yellen."

"I told him you was ridin' the Trace with me, as a U. S. Mail inspector."

Mot Lathrington nodded. "The Post Office Department did hire me—"

"Huh? For what?"

"To check on you mostly."

Danny was staring now with his jaw sagging. What he was thinking about

particularly was the scandalous way he had tampered with the mail entrusted to his charge—in front of an inspector. His job was going to last about a minute and that was all.

Mot Lathrington was talking again. It turned out to be quite a speech he made. "You're right about one thing, son. It is a shame and a crime how the government has left this mail route to limp along and take care of itself. But in a big country like ours, new and growin', it takes time to get around to meetin' all the needs. Meanwhile the mail's got to somehow go through, and to accomplish that—" Mot Lathrington pulled at his pipe—"the carriers has got to be like you, honest, brave, resourceful, and with a knack for stayin' alive until such time as fightin' can begin. You see, there's been tall tales circulatin' through the department about you—tall tales, good and bad." He smiled warmly. "Now I can go back and tell 'em the good ones is the true ones."

Danny took a deep breath and looked both ways on the trail self-consciously. "We better start roundin' up the horses."

"No hurry, is there?"

"But your gold—"

"You didn't see none, did you?"

Mot Lathrington was smiling that mischievous way again.

"Course I never seen it," Danny said. "You got it sewed up tight inside the skin poke."

"It's only rifle lead inside the poke, son. Sorry how I deceived you, but my orders about puttin' you to the test called for bein' as realistic as I could. Since the lead's already here though, you might's well put it by, against that day when Uncle Sammy institoos proceedin's to make the Natchez Trace as safe a place for travelers as what the highroad is between New York and Philadelphia."

Eyes glowing, Danny asked, "When's that day comin'?"

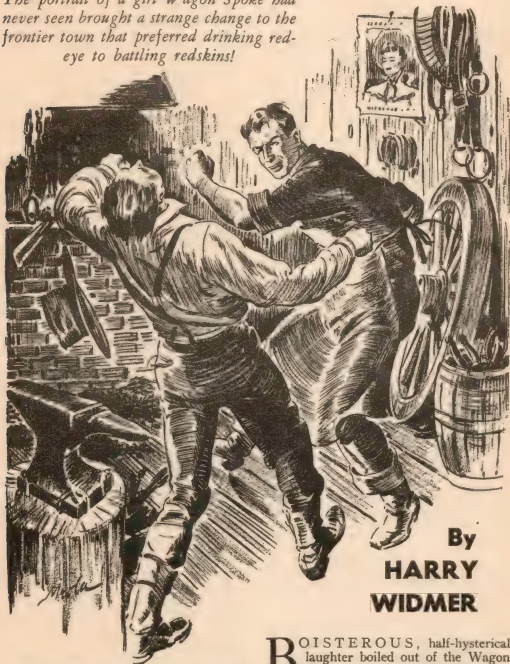
"Depends most-part on you."

"On me!"

"Sure. Six years of goin' and comin' on the Trace, and you're the one that's fitted to say. Ain't I told you? You're comin' back to Washington with me to advise the big augers on how and when and where."

Powdersmoke Portrait

The portrait of a girl Wagon Spoke had never seen brought a strange change to the frontier town that preferred drinking red-eye to battling redskins!



By
**HARRY
WIDMER**

The teamster had made a slurring remark about that picture . . .

BOISTEROUS, half-hysterical laughter boiled out of the Wagon Spoke saloons and rolled down the little frontier street like a stampede of boogered ghosts. Down at the blacksmith's shop, Johnny Trant had checked

the forge for the night and was loudly whistling a gay tune. With quick, jerky movements he slicked-up in front of a mirror. His restless eyes flicked to a picture beside the mirror—and he stopped whistling.

Johnny had carefully cut that picture from a magazine some drummer had left at the Last Scalp Saloon. The picture was a reproduction of an oil painting entitled: *Maris*. It was the waist-up portrait of a lovely girl—a dream-girl that buckskin men would conjure up into their minds on lonely nights.

There was worship in Johnny's eyes as he told her. "My first drink tonight is to your eyes." He had gotten that line from some magazine too. Then his glance went to the artist's name scrawled in one corner of the picture.

"Lucky gent," breathed Johnny. "He knows her."

Any further thoughts of Maris were interrupted by the clattering arrival of a small, mud-splattered freighter wagon. The driver, a gray-haired man in dusty, fringed buckskin, swung down and entered the blacksmith shop. He called out to Johnny:

"Horse threw a shoe."

Johnny went on with his slicking-up, said over his shoulder: "No shoes to-night, friend. Shop's closed." Johnny jerked a thumb toward the Last Scalp Saloon which fairly seemed to rock with the shrill laughter that blasted from its lighted windows and doors. "C'mon an' join the fun, drink up—for Sittin' Bull may move in for breakfast."

The newcomer grasped the door jamb as if to steady himself. "Are you in charge here?"

"No," said Johnny. "The boss has been at the Last Scalp for the last three hours. By this time he wouldn't know a horseshoe from a brass spittoon."

The gray-haired driver still held to the door jamb. He spoke in a tired voice. "Weeks ago I started out with eight other wagons and a cavalry escort." He nodded wearily toward the mud-streaked freighter. "This is the only one that's left." He added doggedly: "I've got to get these supplies through to General Custer."

Johnny slapped a low-crowned Stetson on his head, tilted it to a rakish angle.

"Sorry, friend, I've been workin' like a horse since dawn. An' now I aim to get me a skinful of red-eye while I've still got the skin." Johnny moved to the door. "C'mon have a drink with me. You'll never get through this damned redskin country, anyway."

A dazed, uncomprehending look was in the older man's eyes. "But—" He stopped, steadied himself and let go of the door jamb. "Do you mind if I use your equipment?"

"Help yourself." The expansive wave of Johnny's arm included the whole shop. "I'm off now. *Adios*—as the Texans say."

Johnny's purposeful strides headed him directly toward the raucous revelry of the Last Scalp. Not twenty feet from the shop he heard a groan and then a dull thud. He stopped, puzzled and annoyed—then retraced his steps to the shop.

He saw the gray-haired, buckskin man sprawled on the floor, weakly trying to raise himself. The buckskin jacket had opened—and Johnny saw the man's blood-stained shirt. He quickly cut away the shirt.

"Just a groove," muttered the older man. "But it keeps opening and bleeding."

Johnny, something of a sawbones, boiled water and did a fair job of bandaging the bullet crease. Then he demanded:

"What's the all-fired hurry in getting that stuff through? You mighta died from loss of blood." Then Johnny added with dubious optimism: "And, anyway, Custer likely has those damned redskins on the run."



THE older man was now sitting on a tree-stump stool. "Yes," he agreed quietly, "General Custer might have the upper hand. Also, he might be cornered and trapped. You know what that means, son? Every last man, woman and child in this town will be massacred and scalped! I've seen the devils at work—and it's not a pretty sight. . . . We can't afford to take a chance on General Custer not winning. Every life in this town depends on Custer—and all the town can think of . . . is getting drunk!

Heavens, man! That ammunition out there has *got* to get through to General Custer." He tried to push himself to his feet. "I'm going to shoe that horse."

Johnny gently eased him back. "I just didn't see things the way you've put 'em, friend. Rest easy. I'll heat up this forge a sight." Johnny tossed off his Stetson and busied himself with the bellows.

The older man cleared his throat. "I'm thanking you, son. My name is Rendew."

Throwing a startled look over his shoulder, Johnny stared at the man. That name was familiar, yet he didn't know the gray-haired man. Puzzled, Johnny said: "Johnny Trant is my handle."

Rendew gravely acknowledged the introduction with a nod.

In short order Johnny had the horse shod. Rendew was walking about the shop, gingerly favoring his side. When Johnny straightened up from his work, Rendew said:

"You like this picture?"

Johnny's eyes narrowed on the older man. He never discussed Maris' picture with anyone. Once he had broken the nose of a teamster for a careless, ribald remark. Johnny's gaze was steady as he said: "I like it—that's all."

"Thank you," said Rendew quietly. "I painted it."

Like a dazzling flash of lightning in a summer sky the realization came to Johnny—Rendew was the name scrawled in the corner of that picture! Johnny's words, when they finally came, were still true to his creed of not discussing Maris:

"Seems to me that the painter of a picture—like that—would get considerable dinero."

Rendew nodded. "Yes, Johnny, my painting did bring in—as you put it—considerable dinero."

"Then why are you freighting, Rendew?"

"It's a long story, Johnny, and goes back to when I came West to do some painting. I was traveling with an army supply train when the Sioux raided it. My best friend was killed before my eyes—and I took his place driving a team. Since then I've been trying to help get supplies through to our soldiers. We've got to stand back of the soldiers, Johnny,

or the West will never be a safe place for womenfolk. There are many people back East who love this beautiful country and want to come out here."

Johnny was thoughtfully silent for long minutes. Then: "You make a gent see things in a different way, Rendew. I reckon if you can give up a good painting job to help the soldiers—I can give up a two-bit blacksmith job."

"What do you mean, Johnny?"

"Well, if you can use a shotgun guard to help get these supplies to Custer—I'm a right smart hand with a short gun or rifle."

Rendew cleared his throat noisily. "I'd certainly be glad to have you ride along with me, Johnny. We're likely to meet both Indians and renegades."

Johnny lost no time in buckling a holstered six-shooter around his waist and taking up a rifle and several boxes of cartridges. About to climb aboard the freighter he paused and said: "There's something I forgot." He went over to the mirror on the wall and carefully removed the picture hanging beside it. He rolled the picture and took great pains to place it in the crown of his Stetson. Then he swung up beside Rendew on the wagon seat.

As the freighter lumbered through the outskirts of the little frontier town, Johnny said: "We'll sure-nuff make this country safe for womenfolk."

"Especially Maris, eh, Johnny?" asked Rendew.

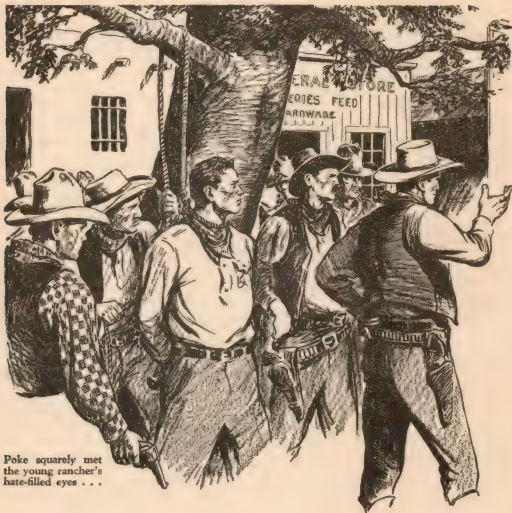
It was the first time Johnny had ever heard that name spoken by a human voice other than his own. The sound of it sent a shock through him. But it was a pleasant shock; for Rendew had spoken that name with a fondness such as Johnny would have used.

Rendew went on: "When this war is won, I'm going to bring Maris out here. . . . Maris is my daughter, Johnny."

For five dusty miles Johnny could think of nothing to say. But when the moon softly silvered the rolling prairie, Johnny ventured: "Then—then maybe I'll see—Maris. . . ."

"It's right likely you will, Johnny." Rendew chuckled deeply. "It's right likely, son."

COWBOY FROM HELL



Poke squarely met
the young rancher's
hate-filled eyes . . .

A hunted man, Poke Bramwell was willing to risk being cut down by friend and foe alike, if he could ignite the smouldering embers of war in the Walnut Bend country, even though he got himself nominated for a blood-mad lynch-mob's noose!

Rangeland Novelette of a Cowhand's Vengeance Trail



By
**WILLIAM
R.
COX**

CHAPTER ONE

Sixgun Practice

POKE BRAMWALL rode into the valley with the noon sun and the dust was like a pattern from yesterday upon his blue shirt and worn jeans. The little ranch perched upon a sloping terrain which ran down to the precious water and he knew that he had arrived at his destination.

The J B was strategically perfect, he saw. To the north ran the spreading acres of Drake Meagre's Bar X, with its thousand head of cattle and its hard crew of riders. To the south was the even larger outfit, the T Z of the Gordon family. The J B was a buffer—or a bar—between the two great ranches of the Apache Valley.

Poke Bramwall rode on. The J B ranch-house was small, unpainted, but severely neat. There was no one in front, but smoke came from the kitchen chimney.

Near the corral a figure stood facing a board fence. Poke reined in and sat watching, his face expressionless.

The tall kid was lanky, loose-jointed. He would be about eighteen, Poke thought. He stood, apparently relaxed, somewhat awkward in posture. Suddenly he crouched, his right hand flashed to the pistol holster at his hip. A gun flashed in the sunlight, and the thin arm jabbed forward. The muzzle of the weapon jammed against the fence, the trigger clicked smoothly. The youth looked down, then, peering, holding the gun steady.

Poke said dryly, "That's a nice draw."

The kid whirled. He had a lean face and his eyes were pale blue. He stared and for a moment a flaming hatred was in him, so that Poke shivered despite the warmth of the sun. Then the fire died and the boy said, "Howdy, stranger. Light and rest yourself."

Poke dismounted. He walked over to where a spike had been driven through the far side of the fence. There were indentations in the wood, very close to the sharp end of the spike. There were a few round marks encircling the spike. Poke drawled, "Kinda hard on a gun, jabbing it at that nail. It'll muck up the muzzle."

Jimmy Beck said tonelessly, "This ain't my good gun."

Poke said, "It makes for steadiness, all right. You got speed." He stepped forward. His own gun was slung low. He crouched, yanked it out, planted it firmly over the protruding nail, held it without cocking, his left hand over the hammer.

The boy's eyes gleamed a little. He said, "You're smooth, stranger."

"I'm Poke." The statement stood, without embellishment, in the Texan fashion.

"I'm Jimmy Beck," said the lad gravely, extending his hand. "This here is my spread. Come and eat."

"Don't mind if I do," said Poke politely. He tended his horse.

Jimmy, his face washed, was sitting at table already. An ancient man with a very dark face and jet black hair was deftly setting forth platters of food. There was meat and biscuits light as feathers and two vegetables. Jimmy said, "Brownie and me run the place. Brownie can do anything."

Brownie stopped in the midst of serving and stared hard at Poke. He said harshly, "You certa'ny favor Leb Bramwell."

Jimmy was not eating. His young face showed distaste for the blunt questioning of a stranger.

Poke drawled, "Was he from hereabouts? I'm Arizona, myself."

Brownie's voice was like the rasp of a file. "He's in the pen and he's from hell—and headin' fast for home if ever he gets out and we find 'im. He murdered Jimmy's pa!"

Poke said, "Whew! And I look like him?"

Jimmy broke in quickly, "Not really. Just a little. At first I thought so."

Brownie grunted. "Mighty good thing, too, stranger."

Jimmy lowered his eyes and began eating. He was, Poke realized, a poised youth with good manners and plenty of brains.

When it was ended Poke helped the old man red up, but Jimmy went out the front door and sat on the porch.

Brownie, who seemed a garrulous codger, said in a low voice, "I feed him good an' we do what we kin. But how much ranchin' kin two men do? They'll pinch him. Meagre's ridin' in today."



POKE dried dishes, keeping silent. The old man rambled on and it was easy to piece together the story. Big Jim Beck had been an easy-going man whose only passion was his son.

But Big Jim liked to drink on a Saturday and gambled more than somewhat and the rider from the Bar X, Lem Bramwell, had tangled with him in town one night.

They had picked up Big Jim with a bullet in his back and Sheriff Zeke Castle arrested Leb. The jury sent Leb to the pen for life. . . .

"It's a hard thing for a waddy to go to jail," said Poke quietly.

"He'd be dead if they left him here!" snarled Brownie.

"Reckon so," murmured Poke. There was the sound of horses out front and he stood near the door, pretending not to listen, but with ears straining for every syllable.

Brownie paused in his labors and shamelessly joined him. The old man's seamy countenance lost its belligerence and Poke was aware suddenly that Brownie was frightened, helpless, pathetic, totally devoted to Jimmy Beck. The heavy voice which dominated the palaver came booming through to them.

"It's like this, Jimmy. Miss Mary and me would be proud to have you live with us, at the Bar X. You'd have a better life, anyways you look at it. I'll give you a good price for the ranch."

Jimmy's soft accents said, "I won't sell to you, Drake."

Brownie clutched involuntarily at Poke's arm and his old eyes lighted up.

There was silence. Then a feminine voice, very sweet and low, said, "You mean you will sell to me, Jimmy?"

Brownie held his breath. His grip was suddenly amazingly strong, but Poke did not stir.

Jimmy said, "I might. But not right now. I got something to work out."

Meagre cut in impatiently, "You can't brood over Big Jim forever, you know."

Jimmy's heels scraped against the porch step. He was standing, and Poke could see the back of his young head through the window, inclined slightly toward the big man upon the black horse. The man had florid, handsome features and wore an air of complete arrogance.

Beyond him the girl stood at her bay horse's head. She was blonde and not much older than Jimmy. She was so beautiful that Poke started, feasting his eyes upon her.

Jimmy's voice, icy and controlled, said, "I'll thank you not to talk like that, Drake. You made me an offer. I'm telling you no!"

Meagre said sharply, "Now, look here, button! You're not in the position to—"

Mary Gordon said, "Drake! Jimmy is my friend!"

For a moment it seemed that Meagre would explode. His features suffused with red blood, his neck swelled. Poke gently disengaged Brownie's grasp and stepped into the living room.

Then Meagre said, "You'll sell. I'll see you again." Visibly fighting for control, he spurred the black horse, rode away.

Poke straightened, kept on going. He reached Jimmy's side, saw that the boy was calm, unafraid. The girl's eyes came to him and deliberately he held them.

Jimmy said, "This is Poke, Miss Mary. He just stopped by."

Poke said, "I was thinkin' of stayin' on awhile. Brownie and me were just talking about it."

Behind him, Brownie lied eagerly, "Yep. Poke's a tophand."

Mary Gordon said, "That would be fine. . . . Jimmy, don't sell if you'd rather not. I know how you feel."

For the first time the youth's composure broke slightly. He stepped forward, taking the girl's hand. He said, "You're my best friend, Mary."

She flushed faintly and stepped back, reaching for her reins. "Drake's temper needs toning down. Glad to have met you, Mr. Poke. I know you'll help Jimmy a lot." She mounted swiftly, with exceeding grace. She nodded to them, still blushing, and rode south towards her T Z spread.

Jimmy said, "Reckon I could use you, Poke. But as to pay—"

"Forget it," drawled Poke. "I got a little stake. I'd like to roost and stay set for a little while. I'll take a small share."

Jimmy nodded.

CHAPTER TWO

"Catfish!"

SATURDAY a week, driving with Jimmy in the buckboard, Poke said, "You got Hereford in your stock. You got a nice little spread. Properly worked, the ranch would pay you good."

Jimmy clucked at the matched bays and said, "Big Jim and me fished and hunted

a lot but we always had good stock."

"You were right not to sell," Poke told him.

Jimmy was imperturbable. "If Miss Mary wants it, I'd sell. Drake rubs me the wrong way."

They rattled into town and the dust from the street came up around them. Walnut Bend was the County seat and a cheerful little gathering of adobe houses and saloons. The Saturday crowd was already gathering, sunbonneted women chatting on the steps of the general store, cowboys swaggering in the streets, ranchers going in and out of the tiny bank, the swinging doors of the bars clacking regularly. Jimmy swung into the hotel's yard and said, "Meet you at the Lone Pine?"

Poke said, "Yeah. Can I help at the bank?"

"Mister Grant knows me," said Jimmy. "We don't need much money. He'll let me have it."

Poke said, "You can pay it back, all right. Well—luck!"

He swung out on Main Street. He went into the Lone Pine and had a quick one—the first in weeks. He took a hitch at his belt and strolled among the people of the Valley, his eyes going left and right, searching. He found the one-room office with the sign above it: *Sheriff*.

He walked past, hesitated, then quickly slipped inside under cover of a covey of passing ranch wives. He closed the door behind him and turned to face a very fat man.

The fat man said, "Hello, Bramwell. Been expectin' you."

Poke said, "Don't call me Bramwell. I'm working at the J B ranch."

Sheriff Zeke Castle whistled with fat lips. He said, "Light and unloosen."

Poke sat down facing the door, putting the sheriff on his left, so that the light was in the fat man's face. He said, "Jim Beck was shot with a .44 Winchester. Lem Bramwell had such a gun, but so did lots of others. How come the jury sent Leb to jail?"

"Leb couldn't alibi himself," said Castle. "He'd threatened Big Jim. He was on the road that night. Big Jim was a right popular man. There never was no real evidence, that's how come I wrote you to come on down."

Poke said, "Who else could have shot Big Jim?"

The fat man's eyes seemed to retreat into the folds of fat. "Lots of people. But nobody had any reason I kin find. There's people think I'm a dumb character. But I'm the sheriff and they don't talk around me."

"And I'll have a better chance," said Poke. "Thanks for working with me, Zeke."

"I ain't," said the sheriff flatly. "But I'm willin' to consider evidence."

Poke said, "I'll be around with some."

He got up and waited for another group of shopping women. He slipped out among them and found himself looking into the blue eyes of Mary Gordon. He touched his hat and started to turn away, but in a moment there was a tug at his sleeve. He looked down at the girl.

She said, "How are things going at the J B? Is Jimmy working hard?"

"Things are fine," said Poke gravely.

She said, "Drake is looking for him today. I wish you would sort of rally around Jimmy."

Poke took three steps before he answered. "I thought you and Meagre were gettin' married?"

She blushed easily, he decided. It was very attractive. She said, "It's not—settled."

Poke said, "Thought I might ride over some night. Pay a little visit. Like to see your layout."

The flush deepened, but she said pleasantly, "I'd be glad to see you."

They parted before the general store. Poke strolled toward the Lone Pine.

Two men came surging through the doors of the Lone Pine. One held the other at arm's length and battered him with a hard and active fist. The second slumped and was unconscious, and Poke saw that the aggressor was Drake Meagre.

Once more the big fist went back, ready to drive into the helpless man who dangled in Meagre's grasp. The blow might easily be fatal, Poke knew. Without second thought, he stepped forward, moving with the speed of a panther.

His hand caught Meagre's wrist, deflecting the blow into space. The intended victim fell loose as Meagre went off balance. There was a crowd now, and Poke

could see Jimmy coming down the street. Poke said quietly, "The man had enough."

Meagre roared, "You low-livered saddle bum, you can't butt into my affairs! That drunken fool drew on me."

Poke said, "He was out like a light. You can't hit a man when he's out."

"Take your dirty hand off me, you fool!" Meagre roared. His face was hard now, but the red had receded from it. Into the greenish, hazel eyes had come calculation. Poke was immobile, throwing loose the bigger man's wrist, stepping back.

Meagre turned suddenly, thrusting people away from the fallen man. It was a scrawny, tattered figure that lay on the ground. Meagre's boot went back and he cried, "I'll stave in his ribs!"

Poke sighed. Meagre was smart, all right. He was determined to put Poke in the wrong by making him butt in. Poke stepped and grabbed, this time getting Meagre's shoulder. He said thinly, "It's personal, now. You can make your play, Meagre!"

Out of the door of another saloon poured five men. They came running, and they were all Bar X riders. The leader yelled, "Comin', Boss!"

Poke said, "Fill your hand, Meagre!"

Young Jimmy's hand sloped down, came up filled with his .45 as he turned and faced the oncoming quintet. His voice was steady. "Hold it, Lanny! This here's a private fight, my man against your boss!"

Meagre's aplomb returned. He said, "Now, wait a minute! Hold everything, everybody!" He managed a smile. "Meh-be I was a little hasty, Poke. You shouldn't have grabbed me, but mebbe I shouldn't have called you names. . . . I don't want young Jimmy in any shootout. Guess we better call this off and have a drink." He made an expansive gesture, including all within hearing. "Step up and name it."

Men came, swaggering now to cover their fear of a moment before. They paid no heed to Poke. They followed the big form of Drake Meagre into the Lone Pine.

Jimmy was staring at Poke. He said, "I never drew before—on men."

"It's all right," said Poke quickly. "You did fine. Thanks for siding me, Jimmy."

The boy said slowly, "You and me are—we work together."

Poke said, "Sure! Let's tote this character some place, huh?"

Jimmy and Poke were supporting the semi-conscious form of Catfish Jones between them, staggering down the street to the sheriff's office. Zeke Castle came out and opened the door to the one-celled sturdy jail. He said, "Fight was over afore I could get there. Glad there was no shootin'. Put Catfish in his regular corner, gents."

The man was skin and bones. Jimmy retreated from the foul whiskey odor, but Poke laid Catfish out in the corner upon a pallet and bent close to him. He asked, "Why did you cross Meagre?"

The bruised lips opened, but no sound came out. Catfish's eyes were opaque, then slowly came to life. He said, "Whiskey, stranger. Jest whiskey."

Poke said, "Tell me why you did it!"

The head shook wearily to and fro upon the blanket. "I'm a old whiskey head. Oughter be ashamed. Useta work. Worked for Meagre, one time. . . ." One eye became very bright. The other was discolored and almost closed by Meagre's fists. Catfish said in a whisper, "Nobody ever beat me afore. Might work agin, fer the right man."

Poke said, "Report Monday to the J B. Come clean and sober."

He went into Castle's office. He said, "I'll pay the fine. Here's twenty to outfit him."

The sheriff said, "No fine. Catfish is all right. You hirin' him?"

"Yeah," said Poke. "For Jimmy."

Castle nodded. He seemed half asleep in his chair, his plump hands folded on his belly. "You go see Jimmy. He ain't happy. Grant and Meagre are closer'n thieves since Big Jim got killed. About run the bank."

Poke sucked in his breath. He said, "The old squeeze play. . . Thanks, Zeke."

He went down to the hotel. Jimmy was in the buckboard, waiting, his lips tight. Poke climbed aboard and the bays lunged for home, straining every strap of harness. They were almost to the ranch before Jimmy spoke. "Grant turned me down. Said we were sort of one-horse to have a loan. Wanted a call mortgage."

Poke said, "I got a hand for us. He won't cost anything."

Jimmy said, "The store gave me credit. . . . You hire Catfish?"

"Yeah," said Poke.

Jimmy considered. Then he said, "He was foreman for Meagre. He got run off for boozin'. But he's a good hand, sober."

CHAPTER THREE

Drygulch Strategy

POKE rode down an arroyo, scanning the brush for a certain white-faced stray of the Hereford strain which he had missed from the small herd.

Catfish was over to the south, working the ridges. Jimmy was east, nearest the ranch, and Brownie was cooking the noon meal at the tiny chuck wagon. Poke saw movement on the rim of the arroyo, a glint of something brown moving in the sun. He bent low, clucking to his horse.

The rifle cracked as he bent his head. The bullet singed his back hair. He flung himself from the saddle and lit rolling.

Then he was crawling on his belly, dragging his toes. He was lucky enough to find three rocks laying loose in a heap, and he got behind them with the greatest of dispatch. The horse was running, doubling back for the ranch and Poke's rifle was in its scabbard.

The sun burned hotly and a curious horned toad came out and stared unwinkingly at Poke. Time went by. Atop the edge of the arroyo all movement had ceased. The bushwhacker was cautious—or perhaps he had Indian blood. Poke eased his position.

After a long time he decided to move. He retreated along the side of the slope, finding cover as best he could.

No shot followed him. He trudged back down into the arroyo and up the other side. He came to the spot from which the shot had been sent. He stood staring at ground carefully dragged with brush, the tracks spoiled. There was no tell-tale cartridge, nothing.

It was bad to be afoot five miles from the chuck wagon in this sun. He began walking northward. From the top of the next incline he could see the Bar X buildings scarcely a mile below. He grinned

to himself and limped on. The boots were killing him but he was not averse to visiting with Drake Meagre.

There were no riders at the Bar X. Poke walked up the steps and hallooed, "Anybody home?"

Inside a man called, "Light and set."

Poke walked into the cool of the house. It was dim, coming from the sunlight, but he made out Drake Meagre in an easy chair, one foot on a stool. Poke said, "Well! Laid up, huh, Meagre?"

"Stepped in a prairie-dog hole," said the big man without rancour. "I didn't hear your hoss. You get throwed?"

"And drug," nodded Poke gravely, indicating the rents in his work clothes. "Thought I'd borrow a cayuse."

Meagre said with reserve, "Glad to oblige. We threw a couple of head of Jimmy's over your line yesterday. You find 'em?"

"Yeah," said Poke. They were polite, but between them was a drawn gun and both knew it. "Sorry you're laid up at this time, Meagre. I'll just help myself."

Meagre waved a big hand. "I'll be out tomorrow. Just givin' it a rest. Take the pinto, he's a good one."

Poke nodded.

He went out to the corral. The pinto was easy to catch up, and was certainly a good work horse. Poke found a saddle and bridle and took his time adjusting straps, still using his eyes and his head. There were three other horses in the cavayar, but none had been ridden that day.

He mounted the pinto, took the buck out of him. He was near the barn when the horse finally was satisfied, which was what Poke had planned. He looked inside. There was a horse in the far stall.

Meagre, propped on a stick, called, "Well, see you later, Poke." The big man was at the back of the house and now there was a rifle leaning against the wall.

Poke said carelessly, "Sure enough." He rode past the leaning man, grinning.

Meagre's expression did not change. Poke went on and crossed the Bar X line. Something bright gleamed at its exact edge and he dismounted and picked up a spent shell. It lay in the shade of a bush where it had been carelessly thrown. Poke slipped it into his pants pocket and remounted.

He discovered the white-face almost at once and chivvied the creature down on the plain. Brownie, trying to cook and hold the cattle all at one time, was grouchy.

Jimmy came in sweating with eight head and said, "That's about them."

"Where's Catfish?" asked Poke.

"Should be in by now," said Jimmy. "He was down in the gulch when I saw him last."

Poke said, "I better look."

He found his own horse on the line and turned the pinto loose to go home. He rode to the south. There was a plain trail of the sorrel Catfish had been riding which was shod front and not rear. The hills became rough and Poke's cayuse picked his way with canny unconcern. And then for the second time that day there was the sound of a rifle, flatly echoing in the hills.

Poke spurred the pony. They went helter skelter among the loose rocks and Poke drew the carbine from his saddle. His face was hard and his chin jutted. He came to the top of the highest rise of the foothills and reined in.

He saw a puff of smoke to his right. He dismounted and crept forward, gaining shelter behind a large boulder. He sighted down the barrel of the carbine, waiting. A man started to change his position, trailing his gun. It was Lanny, the Bar X foreman.

Poke waited. To the south a shot whined through the air. A shrill voice yelled, "Damh you, Lanny, come and get it!"



TWO other rifles rang out. Catfish cursed and Poke knew his man was hit. Immediately he threw down on the spot where Lanny had flattened himself. He pressed the trigger, threw the bolt and waited with the gun cocked. His first shot missed, as he had expected, but Lanny was surprised and made a move, trying to gain cover against this crossfire. Poke shot again, aiming to lead the foreman as he ran. Bullet and man came together. Lanny yelled, threw out his arms and toppled off the hill, rolling down to the swift-moving river below.

Catfish howled, "Come in, boys! They're over yonder!"

Poke was already running. Ten yards away he knelt and fired again. There was motion in the break and someone said, "They're comin' in! They got Lanny!"

Then there was crashing, while Poke emptied his gun from as many different positions as he could assume at top speed, making himself appear a posse of men. After that came the silence.

Poke reloaded, hurrying to where he had heard Catfish's voice.

The emaciated man had filled out some since coming to the J B, but he was still gaunt and the blood upon his shoulder did not enhance his appearance. He lay against a tree and said, "I ain't in shape to stand this, Poke. Them devils got me just as you got here."

Poke made a bandage of his undershirt and laid it against the gaping hole in the shoulder. It was a nasty wound, too low, too close to the lung. He said, "I'll catch your horse."

"Fust I better tell you," said Catfish. "I was on the road the night Jim Beck

got his'n. I was drunk and ridin' back to the Bar X. I was foreman for Meagre then."

Poke said, "You saw Jim killed?"

Catfish shook his head, "I was drunk. But I heard the shot. And I seen Meagre on the road. He never said nothin' to me about it. I kept shut, as Leb seemed guilty to me and everybody else hereabouts. But then Meagre fired me. And then when I said somethin' about Big Jim in the bar he cursed me and I drew on him, only I was drunk agin."

Poke said, "What did you say about Big Jim that made Meagre so mad?"

Catfish drew a deep breath, grimacing with pain. "I happened to hear young Jimmy didn't get no loan. I reminded Meagre how Big Jim had put him in the bank hisself—and lived to regret it." Catfish sighed and muttered, "You better ketch that hoss. I'm runnin' low."

Poke cursed himself for palavering with a sick man and caught the horse. Catfish kept his mouth shut all the torturous way to the chuck wagon. When he opened it, blood ran out.

SAYS MAN CAN NOW USE POWER OF 1000 MINDS

A strange man in Los Angeles, known as "The Voice of Two Worlds," reveals the story of a remarkable system that often leads to almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind, achievement of brilliant business and professional success and new happiness. Many report improvement in health. Others tell of increased bodily strength, magnetic personality courage and poise.

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He maintains that man, instead of being limited by a one-man power-mind, has within him the mind power of a thousand men or more

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Brownie was as good as a doctor. Men seldom lived of gunshot wounds on the range, but Brownie would not give up. Catfish lapsed into delirium and Poke had to ride the herd with Jimmy, turn and turn about while Brownie crouched over the incoherent man and days went by.

Finally Poke said, "It's no good. We're losin' time and the herd's got to be branded. I'm ridin', Jimmy."

"Where to?" asked the youth. He was dead beat, but he had never complained. He wore a pearl-handled gun now, a beautiful weapon which Poke had never seen before Catfish's accident. "Looks like Meagre may jump us. I can't understand why we haven't heard from him— if he's so anxious to hurt us."

"Meagre is smart as an Apache," said Poke. "He plays a hit and run game. He's got patience with his brains. I'm ridin' for Mary Gordon."

Jimmy said, "You think she can help?"

Poke said, "Hold the fort, Jimmy. I'll let you know!"

He went south on a fresh mount, going fast. The next morning he slid into the yard of the T Z on a fagged nag. He got stiffly down and Mary Gordon came to meet him.

She said, "It's not the time I thought you would visit, but you're welcome, Poke."

"It's not pleasure," said Poke. "Catfish is hurt and we can't hold the herd. I need a couple men. If you're finished with the brandin'."

"How bad is Catfish?" she asked.

"Shot through the lung," said Poke.

Her eyes clouded. He waited, knowing she was thinking rapidly, that at last she was frightened into full consideration of the war which was going on in Apache Valley, the sneaking, undercover warfare in which her own interests were completely involved. She said softly, "Was it—Drake?"

"His men. . . . I shot Lanny."

She nodded. "I was afraid. Let's hurry, Poke."

She called and two cowboys, One Eye and Musty Joe appeared from the bunkhouse. They saddled three horses and rode north. Mary rode at Poke's side without words, but he felt the full spirit

COWBOY FROM HELL

of her friendliness and co-operation.

He said, "What about that fancy gun young Jimmy wears?"

Mary started. She said sharply, "Is he wearing Big Jim's gun?"

"Is that it? Yeah, he's wearing it."

"Then he's ready to meet Big Jim's real killer!" said Mary decisively. "And Leb Bramwell is still in jail!"

"I agree with you," said Poke. "Bramwell never did it."

"Young Jimmy knows!" she cried. "Let's hurry!"

They rode faster, into the noon sun, going over the country like four centaurs.

CHAPTER FOUR

His Father's Gun

POKE was suddenly in a driving hurry. The two T Z hands were expert, herding the cattle down to the J B branding pens.

Jimmy had been silent. He still wore the pearl-handled .44 as he moved about his chores in the camp, but Poke sensed that the boy was brooding.

As soon as the cattle was safe Poke changed clothing, dousing himself with buckets of water and slicking back his too-long hair. He caught a fresh horse and admonished Musty Joe and One-Eye to hold the ranch. Then he spurred toward Walnut City. It was dusk when he pulled up at the sheriff's office.

There were four Bar X horses at the rail before the Lone Pine. Poke swung down and the fat sheriff was still in his chair. He tapped a stiff document against his teeth and said:

"Howdy, Poke. Hear you've been havin' a bit of trouble."

"You learn a lot without moving from that chair." Poke grinned. "Now what do you know about a man named Grant, over at the bank?"

"Grant took a trip on yesterday's train. Said he was goin' down El Paso way to see his sister." The sheriff spread the paper on his desk. "This here's a warrant, sworn to by three men. It's for your arrest, Poke."

"Ah!" said Poke. "Lanny, eh?"

Castle nodded. "Guess you got him,

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all right. This here is made in the name of Poke Bramwell."

Poke drew in his breath. "Meagre knows who I am?"

"He's been sendin' telygraphs to Arizona," said Castle.

Poke said, "You goin' to serve the warrant?"

"If I don't, there'll be shootin'."

Poke said, "I'm safe in your jail?"

"Natcherly," Castle shrugged. "On'y way I kin keep you safe is in the jail."

Poke drew his revolver and laid it on the battered desk. He said, "Will you take a look at Grant's papers? You're on the director's board of the bank. There's got to be a reason for Big Jim's murder."

Castle scabbled in his desk and produced keys which he tossed to Poke. "Lock yourself up. You know, I never thought of Grant. He's sich a pussycat. Grant, Meagre and Big Jim. They were friends."

Poke said, "I'm just a jailbird. You figure it out, then turn me loose with my gun."

Zeke Castle sighed. "Looks like I got to stir myself. Wish I could lose a little of this weight!" He got up and took Poke's gun and put it in an ancient safe. He settled his hat more firmly and said, "I'll jest look in the bank now, while Orrey's busy at the store."

The bank was just across the street. Poke went into the lone cell, unlocking the door, throwing the keys on Castle's desk and slamming the catch behind him, effectually putting himself in durance vile.

He chuckled, stretching on the bed. . . .

A rough hand shook him awake. He leaped to his feet and the light of a lamp blinded him, but not before he had seen the drawn guns. Meagre's harsh voice was saying:

"Come out and be hanged, you murderer and murderer's brother!"

The Bar X men were there, silent, hard-faced men. Orrey from the store hovered in the background, his weak face contorted with conflicting emotions. Behind Meagre, in Castle's office, the sheriff writhed in ropes which encircled him. A man held another rope.

Castle shouted, "They got me by surprise, Poke! In the bank!"

COWBOY FROM HELL

"Robbin' us!" said a man. "Castle and this hombre are pardners!"

Meagre said, "We'll hang Castle too. This town needs a final cleanin'. We want Texas justice!"

He was smart enough to strike the correct note, always, Poke thought. Someone gave vent to a rebel yell and others took it up. It was a fine incitement to the mob spirit. Meagre's men grasped him and he was out in the cool night air, seven guns trained upon him. Meagre harangued the crowd, "This man is Leb Bramwell's brother! He killed Lanny and tried to kill Coe and Dunn and Frey. Now he and the sheriff, your elected representative, are conspirin' to rob our bank!"

The growl went around the Walnut Bend crowd. There was a cottonwood tree which had been used before in earlier, wilder days. They were rushing Poke along toward it and someone yanked his hands behind him and tied him together.

Meagre shouted, "We'll come back and get Castle next!"

Then the riders came in. There were only two of them, but the crowd parted to let them through. The cry went up, "Jimmy! It's Bramwell's brother! Poke is your enemy!"

Young Jimmy rode straight in the saddle, Brownie beside him. Meagre stood with outstretched hand, "Just in time, Jimmy! We got him. He was tryin' to rob you, too."

"Yeah," said a man. "He's a snake!"

The hullabaloo went on. Jimmy was wearing his father's gun, Poke saw. He met the eyes of the young man even as they dropped the rope over his neck.

Jimmy came forward, and behind him, stooped, wearing two old seven-inch Colts which seemed to drag on the ground, came Brownie. When he was facing Poke, two steps away, Jimmy paused. Brownie came on, and stood closer to Poke. Jimmy said:

"I swore to get any Bramwell who came within reach. I swore to get Leb when he came from the pen. I was swearin' to get the breed which killed Big Jim. I mean to do it!"

Poke said very clearly, "Well, why don't you get him then, Jimmy?"

Jimmy said, "I will!"

He swung about. Brownie, moving with

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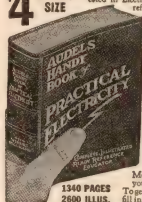
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incredible speed, whipped out a Bowie knife big enough to slice the head off a steer. The ropes which bound Poke fell loose. One of the big Colts came out and found its way into Poke's hand. He bounced away from Brownie and the two of them covered the crowd.

Jimmy said flatly and coldly, "Fill your hand, Drake!"

The Bar X men scattered, but the crowd engulfed them for the moment. One got a weapon loose and Poke crashed a slug into him as the mob broke and scurried for safety.

Drake Meagre, pale, then red, roared with rage. His big hand went down. He was swift with it, swift as a gun-slinger of experience can be. Poke wheeled, watching Jimmy.

The boy dipped his thin body. His hand went down, found the pearl butt of Big Jim's gun. It leaped out, jabbed forward. Jimmy's left hand swept, fanning, and Poke, even in the stress of the event, knew that fanning was a stunt learned not from Big Jim but from Poke Bramwell.

The shots banged together, flatly, echoing in the dusty purlieus of Walnut Bend. Jimmy stood like a sapling, bending a little, swaying. Meagre seemed unhurt, but his mouth opened and no sound came.

Then Meagre put his two hands to his middle, as though holding himself together by main strength and walked to the boards of the sidewalk. He sat down, painfully, retching.

A fussy little doctor came running with a brown bag. Jimmy was staring down at his father's gun which lay in the street. His right arm hung useless. Brownie leaped fiercely to his side, growling at the doctor, "Tend to that beef on the walk. I'll handle this lil' ole flesh wound!"

The doctor tried to stretch Meagre up on the walk, but the big man shook his head. He looked up at Poke and said, "I played it too close."

Poke said, "Catfish was your mistake. Catfish tipped me on the bank business."

"I should have killed him," said Meagre calmly. "How did you know I didn't have a sore foot—that day?"

"The horse in the stable was saddled," said Poke. "Your rifle was a .44—I found a .44 shell and horse tracks from the

COWBOY FROM HELL

stable, right fresh. . . . Anyway, it had to be you. You are the killer kind."

"I was," amended the big man. His face was gray, now. "I killed Big Jim. I ordered Catfish shot. I did it all. I stole the money from the bank and Big Jim found it out. . . . I admit it all. I want to die clean. . . . Will you take off my boots, Doc?"

They removed his boots in the time-honored custom and they watched Drake Meagre die.

Young Jimmy was waiting in the Lone Pine, a bandage on his arm. He said, "I knew you right away, Poke. I knew you were a Bramwell from the start. You look like Leb too much. I was waitin' to learn your game."

Poke said, "You're a great boy."

Jimmy drank his whiskey without blinking. "Mary told me you had to be right. Said she knew it by lookin' at you. . . . I rassled myself some, Poke. You mebbe thought I was crazy—"

Poke said, "Leb don't belong in jail. He's wild, but he's a good brud. The kid always was good to Mom."

Jimmy nodded. "You'll be goin' up to get him. Would you come back and work with me?"

Sheriff Castle waddled in. He said, "I'm plumb ashamed. They took me in the bank like I was a baby. Lynchin' was the only way for them after I seen those papers. . . . There's a mortgage on the Bar X. Belonged to Big Jim. Seems he won it in a two-handed game with Drake, the night he was killed. Grant was holdin' it over Drake, aimin' to be a pardner. . . . But Meagre scared Grant outa town."

Jimmy said, "You could run the Bar X for me, Poke! Please!"

Poke grinned. "I got to ride now. But not to the pen. I got to ride out to see Catfish!"

Jimmy said, "Catfish came to and told us about things and we rode in. . . . You ain't gonna see only Catfish!"

Poke said, "I got to thank Mary for sidin' me, don't I?"

Jimmy sighed unhappily. "First Meagre—now you! Well, reckon I couldn't grow up to her soon enough anyway! Damn you, Poke, go ahead. Ride!"

THE END

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Men—Here, without a doubt is positively the greatest Billfold and Pass Case Bargain that you'll be likely to see for a good many years to come. For a high quality Leather Billfold, beautifully engraved in gold, with your LODGE emblem or Army or Navy Insignia and Name, you would expect to pay up to \$4.50 and consider it a marvelous buy. If you take advantage of this sensational introductory offer, you can get this superb genuine Leather Wallet and Pass Case for only \$1.98, and we will send you absolutely free a specially designed three-color Emergency Identification Plate, which carries your Social Security Number, your Name and Address or your Army Draft Number. This fine grain leather Billfold must actually be seen to be fully appreciated. Besides the spacious compartment at the back which can be used for currency, checks, papers, etc., it has four pockets each protected

by celluloid to prevent the soiling of your valuable membership and credit cards. When closed, this handsome Billfold has the soft velvety feel you find only in select quality leather. Your choice of Emblems and Initials are beautifully embossed in 23 karat gold on the face of the Billfold. Due to difficulty in obtaining choice leather because of war conditions, the supply of these Billfolds is limited. Remember if you send your order promptly, we will include absolutely FREE, a beautiful Identification Key Tag and Gift Chain to match, all hand engraved with your Name, Address, City and State. If after receiving your Billfold and Free Gift, you don't positively agree that this is the most outstanding bargain you have ever come across, return them to us and your money will be cheerfully refunded in full. Send your order today, without fail, so you won't be disappointed.

Rush This Coupon For This Once-In-A-Lifetime Bargain!

**ILLINOIS MERCHANDISE MART,
Dept. 212-E, 54 W. Illinois St., Chicago**

If you want a LODGE, ARMY, NAVY, MARINE or AIR CORPS INSIGNIA, state name here.
Gentlemen: I enclose \$1.98. Please send me a Genuine Leather Billfold with my name and choice of Emblems engraved in 23k gold. Include absolutely free, an Emergency Identification Plate carrying my full Name and Social Security Number, or Draft Number. Also include FREE an Identification Key Tag and Gift Chain to match, all hand-engraved with my Name, Address, City and State.

My Full Name..... (Please print clearly)

Address.....

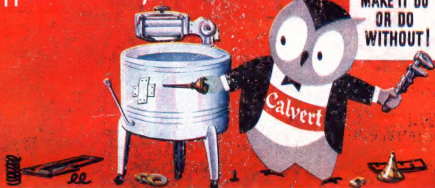
City..... State.....

Social Security Number..... Army Draft Number.....

Please ship C.O.D. for \$1.98 plus postage.

In times like these, a washer's rare,
Appliances need your tender care!

**FIX IT UP—
MAKE IT DO
OR DO
WITHOUT!**



When things wear out, or fail to go —
Try patching first, and save your dough!



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Makers of the whiskey with the "Happy Blending"

Although we are distilling only war alcohol, a limited amount of choice whiskey is available from reserves. Every drop is the same prewar quality that made these whiskies America's favorites.



Calvert Distillers Corp., New York City. BLENDED WHISKEY Calvert "Reserve" 86.8 Proof—65% Grain Neutral Spirits, Calvert "Special": 86.8 Proof—60% Grain Neutral Spirits.